

The Return of the Hopper by mlbk53

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Summary: ** Season 3 Spoilers** Just as the Byers and El were adjusting to their new life, Joyce receives some life changing news and El is harboring a secret.

1. Chapter 1

WARNING: **Season 3 Spoilers**

Chapter 1: The News

It's been seven months. Seven long months since Hopper died in the explosion. Jonathan, Will, and El were adjusting to a new town and new school. Joyce was getting acclimated to her new environment with new people who will never understand her or her kids. Birthdays came and went. Christmas came, but with little joy. What does one get a teen girl who lost the only true, loving parent she has known? What does one get the two boys who have never left her side, yet she took them from the only other people who care and love them? And what do the kids of this brave woman give her to replace the love she has lost?

So, the Byers family, including El, spent Christmas back in Hawkins. Their first trip back since they left. Flo invited them for dinner. Joyce knew the woman was like a mother to Hop and missed him just as much as them. The kids made plans: Jonathan and Will decided to sleep over at the Wheelers for the one night they were in Hawkins and Max begged El to sleepover at her house. Flo offered to let Joyce stay at her house instead of a Joyce was lying in Flo's guestroom bed, she felt lonely. Every night, every single night since Hop died, El would climb into bed with her. It became a pattern. Joyce would pop into Jonathan's room to say goodnight, then head into Will's to kiss him on the forehead, and lastly lay in bed with El until she fell asleep. Then, she would tip toe out of El's room into her own, slip on her pajama pants and one of Hop's old t-shirts and lay in the darkness. Twenty minutes later, her door would creak open and shut and soon a warm body found it's way cuddled into her side, grasping her hand tightly.

It felt just like yesterday when her and El made eye contact in front of the mall while she sobbed in Will's arms and conveyed a message to El that she never wanted to tell her. She let go of Will and ran towards El when the young girl's legs gave out and collapsed on the hard ground sobbing. Joyce sat next to her and pulled her into her arms and repeatedly

whispered, "I'm so sorry." Once El calmed down, she asked Joyce, "Where do I go now?"

Joyce replied wiping a tear from El's cheek, "With me. You come home with me."

So, that's what they did. Once the military and Owens gave them the okay to leave, Jonathan drove Joyce, Will, and El home. Joyce led El directly to her room and handed her a pair of her pajamas to change into while Joyce also put on a pair. Joyce lifted the bed covers and El slipped in and asked, "Will you hold me?"

Joyce silently walked to the other side of the bed and climbed in. She pulled El into her arms and whispered, "I'll hold you and never let go."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

The next morning Joyce called Owens. She asked him to make sure no one but her could take El. That girl was hers now. Hop would want it that way. Owens promised her he would take care of it. Three days later after Hop's funeral, Owens approached Joyce at the fire hall while funeral goers were having lunch with an envelope in his hands. "Here you go," he said handing it to her.

"What's this?"

"Just look."

Joyce opened the envelope and pulled out a birth certificate. **Father: James Hopper. Mother: Joyce Byers.**

"How?" Joyce asked holding the piece of paper to her chest.

"I have my ways. And I owe you, that little girl, and Chief-o. He loved you, you know?"

Joyce's lips trembled and tears began to fall. She nodded. "I know. And I loved him too. But we never told one another. I think we both just knew."

Two weeks after the funeral, El and Joyce headed to the cabin. They

wanted to retrieve what they could of El and Hopper's things before they packed up the Byers' house for the big move. The two stood in front of the door trying to find the courage to go inside. El slipped her hand in Joyce's and said, "Together." The two lost souls began packing El's things. Joyce decided it would be easier. Less emotional attachment. They loaded El's boxes in Joyce's green pinto and walked back into the wrecked cabin. "I thought we packed all my things," El said.

"I think we should pack a few boxes of Hopper's things too."

"Why?"

Joyce replied, "So, when we move, it will be like he's still with us."

El smiled and headed off to find what she wanted to bring with them of Hopper's. Joyce grabbed a box and started walking around to see if anything caught her eye. She noticed a JCPenney bag from the mall, knelt down, and looked inside. She pulled out the receipt and began to cry. "Joyce, are you okay?"

El knelt next to her. "What is that?"

Joyce replied through her tears, "It's a receipt from the day I was supposed to go on a 'date' with your dad. He told me it wasn't a date, but I knew it was. He bought new clothes. He wanted to impress me."

El hugged Joyce as she cried. "He loved you."

Joyce smiled. "Not as much as he loved you."

"There are different types of love."

Joyce's brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"He family loved me. He loved me like Rick loved Laura. He romantic loved you. Like Robert and Holly."

"You have been watching too much General Hospital," Joyce laughed.

El grinned.

"I hate moving you and the boys away from here. It won't be home. Not

like Hawkins."

El shrugged. "With you, anywhere is home."

Joyce began to cry again and hugged El.

After the Byers family returned from Christmas in Hawkins, Joyce noticed El acting off and distant. She just thought it was about being back in Hawkins and missing her friends and Hop, but it felt like El was keeping a secret from her. Joyce asked her one night while they were lying in the silence if anything was bothering her, but El said no and Joyce dropped it. But Joyce Byers knew better. Something happened that El isn't telling her. But, life went on and Joyce forgot about it. The makeshift family got back into their routine. Joyce would wake up and get herself ready for the day then get the kids up while she cooked breakfast. She fed the kids and kissed their heads as she pushed them out the door to get to school. February 14, 1986 started out the same but changed in an instant. Right before Joyce was about to grab her purse to head to work the phone rang. She groaned assuming one of the kids forgot a book and needed her to drop it off. "Which one of you forgot a book?" she questioned answering the phone.

"Joyce, it's Murray."

Joyce froze. "I got your messages," she replied.

"Why haven't you called me back?"

"I left Hawkins because I was tired of being stuck in that world where monsters and Russians take people I love from me."

"Joyce, we really need to talk."

Joyce groaned. "About what, Murray? I'm not interested in helping you create a new machine."

"About Hopper."

Joyce's whole body tensed. "Do not say his name. There is nothing to talk about, okay? He is gone. Let me grieve."

"Joyce, Owens and I are meeting at this abandoned building two towns over from you behind the Burger King. Please meet us there. That's all I ask. Hear what we have to say and then decide if you never want to hear from us again. Please. I really think you should," Murray begged.

Joyce was silent. Should she meet with them and talk about the one topic that is bound to make her cry and never stop? Or forget about it and carry on with her normal day? *What would Hopper do?* She asked herself and knew her answer. "What time are we meeting?"

"11. Don't be late! You won't regret it, Joyce."

Joyce didn't want to get her hopes up about Hopper. No, she didn't see him die but there weren't any remains near the explosion or goo. There is a chance that he could be alive, but not likely. Joyce was second guessing her decision to meet Murray and Owens, but knowing Hopper, if the roles were reversed, he would go meet with Murray in a heartbeat. She called into work and told them she was taking a sick day, grabbed her keys, and hit the road. While driving to the meeting spot, Joyce tried to keep her mind occupied. She truly didn't want to get her hopes up. It would be too much. Her heart couldn't go through losing him again. They just agreed to go on a date. Joyce was ready. She was ready to open her heart again after Bob. Then, the world played a sick, cruel joke on her. She was just about to get everything she has ever wanted: the monsters gone, her sons safe and healthy, and Hopper. No, two out of three isn't bad, but she would continue fighting a million monsters if it meant Hopper could still be alive.

Joyce arrived at the abandoned building and she saw Owens and Murray waiting outside. She took a deep breath and met them. "Hello boys."

"Joyce! You came!" Murray exclaimed.

"You mentioned Hopper. I had to."

Owens said, "Let's take this conversation inside folks."

Owens led Joyce and Murray to a boardroom and urged them to sit.

"So, I called this meeting because I have a theory and a lead about Hopper."

Joyce shifted nervously in her seat.

"Joyce, Murray told me that you never saw Hopper die nor were there any remains or "goo" surrounding the area where he was standing. Is that correct?" Owens questioned.

Joyce nodded.

"Murray called me about a month back with a theory that Chief-o jumped into the open portal before you turned the key. I looked into it."

"And.."

Murray jumped in and said, "Hopper would have died and turned to goo right there on the platform, but there wasn't any goo when I found you standing there. So, I told Owens to see the security tapes. The Russians recorded everything just in case someone leaked things to the opposition. Jim jumped into the portal before the key exploded, Joyce. It's on tape."

Joyce couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Are you telling me that there's a chance that Hopper is alive somewhere?"

"That's what we are thinking. We just aren't sure where," responded Owens.

"Do you have any leads?" Joyce questioned. *Detective Byers is back.*

"The portal lead to two places. Russia or the Upside Down. We just don't know where Jim ended up," said Murray.

"Well, come on then. Let's get to looking," Joyce said enthusiastically.

"Joyce. It's not that simple," replied Owens warily.

Joyce stood up and slammed the table. "I'll tell you what's not simple! Having my kid being taken by these monsters year after year. That's not simple. Having to fight these monsters year after year. That's not

simple. A little girl was tortured from the moment she was born because of some sick man's mind. That's not simple. Watching Bob die! That's not simple! Having to choose between the world and Hopper! That's not simple! Having the fortune of holding my kids, but El can't hold her father again! That's not simple! Having to take my family, which includes El now, from the only life they have ever known because of these monsters in our town! That's not simple! That little girl crawling every night into my bed and both of us crying because we lost the man who loved us more than the world! **THAT'S NOT SIMPLE!** You narrowed it down to two places. That's simple. We start at one and try the other if the first one doesn't hold Hop. That is simple. Do you understand?"

Owens and Murray nodded their head fervently.

"Alright. Now, where do we start? The Upside Down or Russia?"

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2: A Secret and A Memory

After Jonathan dropped El and Will back at home before heading to work, Will decided it was time to confront El. The two teens bonded in the months since Hopper's death, especially since Joyce calls them the twins when she introduces them in public. Will and El had each other when moving to this new town and new school. They would stay up late on Fridays and make a fort in his room and talk about everything. El would talk about missing Hopper and how lost she feels. She also talked to Will about missing her powers. She couldn't quite understand why her battery never recharged. Yes, she used a lot of energy fighting off the Mind Flayer in Hopper's cabin, but she should have bounced back by now. They both discussed missing Hawkins and their friends back home. School was lonely. No one was like The Party back home. People at school called them "Freaks" and "Losers". They made fun of El because she wasn't the best speaker and Will because he was shy. They swore not to tell Joyce. They don't want her worrying anymore.

"El, can we talk?" asked Will as they waltzed around the kitchen preparing a snack before homework.

"Sure," replied El with her mouth full of M&Ms.

"Are you hiding something from us? You have been super distant with Mom recently and you are constantly in your room, with the door three inches open of course. But you just seem off."

"It is nothing," replied an adamant El.

"El, it has to be something. Our Friday night fort sessions aren't the same. I'm the only one talking. And you hardly talk to Mom. Do you still sleep in her room now or did you cut yourself off completely from her? You know she lives for you sneaking into her room. You are her only tie to Hopper! She needs you. Don't cut her out of -"

El interrupted, "Shut up."

"What?"

"I love Mom. I would never hurt her."

"Then, what is going on, El?" Will prodded.

"Drink a can of Coke."

Will's brows furrowed in absolute confusion.

"Just drink it, Will. Please."

Will nodded and opened the fridge to grab a can. He downed it quickly.

El said, "Place it in front of me."

Will did so.

"Now, watch," El commanded.

Will watched as El stared at the can of Coke. She furrowed her brows and focused in on the little red can. Nothing was happening and Will was about to give up his patience when the can was crushed.

"El! Your powers are back?" questioned Will.

"Yes," replied El.

"How? When? What? I need to know everything."

"I was in English class and Mr. Watkins asked me to read out loud. I said psychic wrong. He laughed. And then everyone laughed. I was hurt and mad. I stared at his coffee cup in his hand and then it exploded," El explained.

"Wow!"

"I think you were right."

Will asked, "What do you mean?"

"Remember that one night a couple weeks after we moved here when

we talked about my powers?"

Will nodded. "Yeah."

6 Months Ago

"I don't understand," El complained laying next to Will in their fort.

"About not having your powers?"

El nodded. "I just don't get it. Why haven't I re-charged yet? They always come back."

"I have a theory," Will said.

"Theory?"

"Like a guess at why something is happening."

El asked, "What is your theory?"

"I think the reason you haven't gotten your powers back isn't just because you were worn out after fighting the Mind Flayer a bunch of times. I think your grief over Hopper is playing a role too."

"Grief... Joyce said that's what me and her are going through. She said it's when you are really sad."

"Yeah. She's right. You both lost someone who you really loved. I think the pain of losing Hopper has a grip on your powers right now."

"How do I get over that pain and get my powers back?" asked El.

"There isn't any time on grief. And you don't ever completely move on after grief or trauma. You learn to deal with it."

"That's what Joyce said when I asked her when my feelings will stop hurting," replied El sadly.

"Don't rush it, El. You are going to miss Hopper everyday. My mom will too. Jonathan and I will miss him in our own way too. But, one day, I think you will smile when you think of Hopper before you cry. And that will be the day your battery will begin to recharge," said Will intertwining

his hand with El's as a sign of support.

Tears filled El's eyes and Will squeezed her hand as he let her cry.

"I think I'm going to like being your sister," said El with a watery smile.

"I'll like being your brother too."

"I still miss Hopper everyday. And I still sleep in Mom's room. It makes her happy and she makes me feel closer to Hopper. But you were right. When we went back to Hawkins for Christmas, Mike and I went to Hopper's cabin. I wanted to feel Hop again. I wanted to feel like he was still with me. And I told Mike a story about me and Hop watching this cowboy movie and before I cried, I smiled. I felt happy talking about Hopper. Then, I told him about my powers maybe being back. Mike asked me to test it by moving the old bookshelf. I focused and it worked. I moved it. But I'm scared to tell Mom," said El.

"Why?" asked Will.

El replied, "She took us out of Hawkins to have a normal life. I have powers. We won't be normal anymore. What if she kicks me out?"

Will laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" questioned a bewildered El.

"Because that is ridiculous. You are Mom's favorite! She would never kick you out. You could light the house on fire and she would still say, "Do you want to go shopping, Baby?" and let you crawl into her bed at night. El, Mom doesn't like secrets. Remember, friends don't lie. Family doesn't lie either. You have to tell her before she finds out on her own."

"Promise she won't get angry?"

"She'll have questions. But no. She won't get angry. I promise."

"I'll tell her when she comes home from work," said El attempting to psych herself up before telling Joyce about her powers.

Before El and Will could continue their conversation, Joyce rushed inside. She ran to her room as fast as lightning and within seconds came out with a bag packed. "Kids, I have to go on a trip. Here is money for groceries and pizza in this envelope. Here's a note for Jonathan explaining the rules. Here's the number you can reach me at. Hopefully, this trip won't be long. I love you both," rambled Joyce giving Will a hug and ruffled his hair.

She moved over to El and hugged her and kissed the top of her head. Joyce leaned down and whispered in El's ear, "If you want to sleep in my room while I'm gone, go ahead. Hold my pillow real tight. It will be like I'm right there."

Joyce grabbed her bag and was about to rush out the door when Will screamed, "Mom!"

"What, Sweetie? I have to go. My ride is waiting for me."

"Mom, you run in here, pack a bag, kiss us goodbye, and expect us not to have questions? What is going on?" asked Will.

"Yeah," replied El joining Will and Joyce at the front door.

Joyce sighed. "I promise, babies. I will explain later. But this is really important. I can't give a lot of details, but I will call you when I arrive at my destination. I promise. I love you both very much and know I am doing this for our family. Okay?"

El and Will shared an understanding look and then nodded at Joyce.

"Thank you! I love you! Tell Jonathan I love him. Now, give me one last goodbye hug, please," Joyce said with stretched out arms.

Will and El walked into her embrace. "I love you, Mom," the teens said simultaneously.

"I love you too. Take care of each other. I will be back. I promise," Joyce said as she walked out the door.

"El, you have to see where Mom is going later and who she is with. This is weird," said Will.

"Really weird," replied El.

"So, explain to me again why we are going to Russia first before the Upside Down? I thought the gate only opened to the Upside Down," asked Joyce from the passenger of Murray's car on their way to meet Owens at the airport.

"The gate opened to two places. It opened either to the Upside Down, where your son was taken, or to Russia, the original base of creating the Upside Down and everything attached to it. Going to Russia is easier because we can take a plane. And since we closed the portal to the Upside Down in Hawkins, the only other known Portal is in Russia anyway. So, to answer your question, we deal with human interaction first and then the scientific. Understood?" answered Murray.

"I hope you and Owens are right about this. I miss him so much," whispered Joyce.

Murray replied, "I know you do. I'm sure your kids do too, especially the telekinetic girl."

"Her name is El. And, yes, she misses him like crazy."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I know you didn't know her name."

"Well, that and also because what I said to you and Jim on the car ride back to Hawkins that fateful night."

Joyce shook her head. "Don't be. We needed to hear that."

"Really?" questioned Murray.

"Yeah. Because of you putting that in our minds, I asked him on a date. A real date. Right before..."

Murray grimaced and replied, "Right before you had to choose between him and the world?"

Joyce nodded and bit her nails nervously.

"Well, on the bright side, you might actually get to go on that date. Possibly sooner than you think, especially if he's in the Russian facility."

Joyce nodded and looked out the window as cars and trees passed. She has missed Hopper desperately throughout these seven months. They have known each other since they were twelve years old. They were best friends and then dated in high school. Joyce and Hopper were inseparable until two weeks before graduation when Hopper announced that he was joining the army to fight in Vietnam. Joyce lost it.

"Fuck you, Jim Hopper! Fuck you!" Joyce exclaimed while running from the spot where Hopper parked his truck at Lover's Lake.

"Joyce! Where are you going? We need to talk about this!"

Before Joyce could respond, she felt two strong arms wrapped around her lifting her up. "You could never run, Horowitz. I can always catch you," whispered Hopper.

"Let me go, Jim," Joyce said through gritted teeth.

"Only if you tell me why you are so upset."

"No."

Hopper spun Joyce around in his arms so they were facing one another. "Come on, Joyce. Let me have it. You never back down from a good fight. Why are you pissed?"

"Did you forget about our plans, Hop?" Joyce quietly asked while avoiding eye contact.

"To drive out of this shit hole and end up anywhere. No. I didn't forget."

"Then, why? Why sign up for 'Nam? We had a plan," Joyce replied hitting him in the chest.

"You deserve more than this town, Joyce. You deserve more than some

random town where we would probably end up living in a piece of shit motel or my truck. Going to 'Nam for just a year or two would give us money and we could afford a crap hole not a shit hole."

Joyce's lips quivered. "A year or two? Hop! We haven't been separated for more than a few hours since we have been twelve years old or the two weeks we broke up and you fucked Chrissy Carpenter! Now, you want to go oceans away from me! Why? I don't need the white picket fence and the two perfect kids. All I need is you! Jesus! Don't go!"

Hopper pulled her close and cradled her face in the palm of his hands. "Listen to me. I love you. Always have. Always will. I know you don't need all that stuff, but I want to give it to you. I want you to have the world. Your dad died when you were fourteen and your mom's a drunk who doesn't give two shits about you. But I do! I want to give you everything they couldn't," he told her sweetly.

"I love you too. But why thousands of miles away? Couldn't you work at your uncle's garage? I'll get a job at Melvad's. We can settle here for a while until we have enough to leave this dump. Please Jim. I'm begging you. Don't go to Vietnam. Please," begged a sobbing Joyce.

"I don't want us to settle, Joyce. We'll just get stuck here. We never wanted to end up here. We've known that since we sat in that oak tree at the cemetery after your dad's funeral and talked about the future. Our future."

"Then, I guess this is goodbye," said Joyce coldly.

"Joyce.."

"No. Hop. Go to 'Nam. And live your own damn life. I don't want to beg you anymore."

Now, it was Hopper's turn to beg, "Joyce, come on! I'll be in Vietnam nine months then I'll be home for a month and I'd do that one more time. Then, I'd be home for good! Please."

Joyce pushed herself out of Hopper's arms. "Goodbye, Jim Hopper," she said solemnly as she walked away before her tears began to fall quickly.

"Joyce!"

"Joyce! Earth to Joyce!" exclaimed Murray attempting to get Joyce's attention.

"What? Sorry. I was somewhere else," replied Joyce.

"Clearly," Murray rolled his eyes. "We are at the airport. Let's go meet Owens and find Jim."

I'm not letting you leave me this time, Jim Hopper.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3: Fears and a Void

After Joyce and Murray met up with Owens and discussed the plan once they reach Russia, the search party boarded the plane. Joyce sat silently alone staring out the window with thoughts ranging from Hopper to her kids. Owens plopped down in the seat next to Joyce on the private plane the US Military had loaned him to use on this rescue mission. "What's on your mind, Joyce? You are awfully quiet."

Joyce turned in her seat to face him. "A lot. Hopper. My kids. Going over what happened that night. And..." Joyce muttered.

"And?"

"And what could have been," replied Joyce with tears brimming her brown eyes.

"After that night?" questioned Owens.

"No. I lost him once and I didn't chase after him. If I put my own selfish wants behind me, Hop and I could have had a different future."

"But you wouldn't have your sons. He wouldn't have found El," said Owens placing his hand on top of Joyce's. "Trust me. Life only gives you what you can handle and what you deserve. You are strong, Joyce. One of the strongest humans I have ever known. Don't let the past control the future. Stay strong."

Joyce was shocked by Owens' sudden heart to heart with her. Their relationship has only ever been doctor-patient's mother. She doesn't know if he's married, has kids, where he lives. Nothing. And now he's sitting here with his hand on hers giving her courage. He's next to her on their way to save Hopper. "Why are you helping me and Murray? You could just write us off as crazy."

Owens sighed and replied, "I was working too much. Trying to stop these other dimensional creatures for years. And then my wife was

diagnosed with cancer. I missed her taking her last breath because I was too focused on work. On the supernatural that no one would believe. On things that don't matter when it comes to human emotion and connection. But if I could travel through time and space and fight other dimensional monsters to get her back like you did for your son and now for Chief-o, I would. I would do it in a heartbeat. You weren't crazy when it came to Will. You aren't crazy now. You are the smartest of us all, Joyce."

Joyce wiped a few fallen tears from her cheeks. "Thank you. Thank you for trying to help my son. Helping me find Hop. And believing in my crazy," Joyce said as she squeezed Owens' hand in appreciation.

"I promise you that we will bring him home. You two have a date at Enzo's to get to," said Owens with a cheshire grin on his face.

Joyce's jaw dropped. "How do you know about that?"

"Murray told me."

"Big mouth," Joyce muttered under her breath.

Owens' shrugged. "Eh. He cares about you crazy kids. I do too. You and Chief-o will make a great couple. But boy, I don't want to be around when you argue. Sparks will fly."

Joyce laughed. "That's exactly how we were in high school!"

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. We were hot and heavy, but when we argued, the kids in the hall parted like the Red Sea. I remember this one time..."

"Joyce!" bellowed Jim Hopper's voice from down the hall.

"Oh shit," Joyce muttered to Karen.

"What did you do?" asked Karen.

"My mom had a girls' night with Lonnie Byers' mom. Lonnie is flunking English Lit. So, of course, my drunk mother decided to sell me out to tutor him."

Karen nodded. "Okay. But why would Jim be angry? It's just tutoring."

"Well..."

Karen's eyes bugged out of her head. "Joyce! What happened?"

"Lonnie came over the other day. We were sitting in front of the couch on the floor going over Shakespeare and shit and he leaned over and kissed me."

"Joyce! What did you do?"

"For five seconds. FIVE. I kissed him back," Joyce recoiled.

"Jim's gonna kill both you and Lonnie!"

"I didn't mean too! He took me off guard and Hop and I got in a fight a couple days ago because he caught me drinking my mom's secret stash."

Karen asked, "Why would Jim be pissed over that?"

"He doesn't want me ending up like my mom. A drunk."

"That's sweet in Hopper's own way."

"Yeah. It's sweet in theory, but when a six foot three burly man is yelling in your face, it doesn't seem sweet anymore."

"Joyce, we've known Jim since middle school. He's always been loud and rude. It's who he is."

"That's not an excuse, Karen. He says he loves me. Then, he needs to stop yelling in my face. Or I will keep slapping him."

"Joyce! You slapped him?"

Joyce nodded.

"Joyce!"

"Karen, I'm seventeen years old. I lost my father and my mother sometimes doesn't know what day it is. I don't need the only person who I love left in the world yelling at me like a fucking child. When he's

screaming two inches from my face, I needed to slap the shit out of him to get him to back off."

"Oh Joyce. You and Jim. Hot and heavy. A match made in heaven or hell depending on what you think."

Joyce nodded and said, "I guess Lonnie blabbed and probably exaggerated what happened at basketball practice and now Hopper is coming to kill me."

"Before he stomps over here and drags you towards your hiding spot, what did you do after the kiss with Lonnie?"

"I broke his nose. Then, I went to Hopper's and we had sex."

Karen grimaced. "Oh. Joyce. I'll make sure you have nice flowers at your funeral."

Before Joyce could respond, Hopper grabbed her by the arm and muttered angrily, "We need to talk. Now."

"Hi Jim. Bye Jim. Bye Joyce," Karen waved as Hopper and Joyce exited the hallway while other students watched.

Hopper and Joyce arrived at their hiding spot, under the steps towards the back of the school, and Hopper barked, "What the hell, Joyce?! I'm sitting in study hall when Lonnie fucking Byers walks by me and whispers, 'Your girl has some nice lips. I wonder how they'd be on my dick.' If I didn't see his nose was already broken and Mr. Cooper wouldn't have walked in when he did, I would have thrown him across the room!"

"Hop, I can explain."

"Yeah. Well, start talking."

Joyce attempted to hold his hand to calm him as she explained what happened, but Hopper pulled away. Joyce frowned and said, "My drunk of a mother was having a girls' night with Lonnie's mom and signed me up to tutor Lonnie in English Lit. He came over the other day and I was tutoring him one second and the next his lips were on mine. And I swear, Hop, I swear it only lasted five seconds. I punched him in the nose and threw his books out on the yard. Nothing else happened."

Hopper nodded but remained quiet.

"I swear, Hop, I feel nothing for him but disgust. You and me just had a big fight and I was so out of it. If I wasn't thinking about you and our fight, I probably would have broken his nose as soon as his slimy lips touched mine. Please, Hop. You have to believe me."

"You kissed him and then slept with me," muttered Hopper.

"I know this sounds stupid, but I needed to forget that kiss ever happened. I wanted only to be reminded of you and your lips on mine and everywhere else."

Hopper ran his hands through his chestnut hair. "I shouldn't have yelled at you."

"When? The other day about me drinking my mom's booze or now?"

"All the times," Hopper replied staring into Joyce's eyes.

"Hop..."

"I mean it, Joyce. I shouldn't do that. It makes me look and sound just like my father. I hate hearing him yell at my mom. Sometimes, I just wanna break his nose for the way he yells at her."

"It's okay, Hop."

"You promise no more Lonnie Byers' kisses?"

Joyce smiled and wrapped her hand around his neck pulling him towards her. "I promise. It's always going to be you. And do you promise you won't yell in my face anymore? Just talk to me like a normal human."

Hopper leaned in and replied, "I promise. Is this where we kiss and make up?"

Joyce muttered, "Let's skip the afternoon. We have more than kissing to do."

Hopper pecked her lips and pulled her towards the doors.

"We would argue like cats and dogs, but we'd always end up together. That's why I was holding back when he kept asking me out," said Joyce.

"Why?" questioned Owens.

"We have kids now. He can't bellow in my face and I can't hit him to make him snap out of it. Or he can't run off and have a two week hook up with Chrissy Carpenter because my mother made me continue to tutor Lonnie. We are adults. It's great to be hot and heavy in the bedroom, but in real life situations, we burn. We throw fire at one another. It scares me."

"But like you said, you always end up back with one another," Owens said as Joyce shrugged in agreement. "Listen, Joyce. I have seen the two of you interact for about two-ish years. Yes, he yells. Yes, you would like someone more like Bob, who was quiet and gentle. But I saw you. I saw you when Will had an appointment or when Will was possessed. It was Hopper who was at every appointment. It was Hopper you turned to for comfort. He's a fucking brute and big mouth. You are mouthy too. But together, I think you guys make a great team. If the roles were reversed, he would be right where you are, leading the search party. Don't let the past ruin what could be a beautiful future."

"I guess I have a date at Enzo's coming up, don't I?"

Owens winked and the two shared a quiet laugh.

"Alright, El. Are you ready?" asked Will as he found a static station on the radio and El tied the bandanna behind her head.

"Yes. Remember, quiet," El said.

El was nervous. This was her first time visiting the void since her powers returned. She just regained her powers and she was afraid that by going into the void, she would use them all up again. She hasn't closed a door or grabbed a book with her powers anymore. She is trying to save up in case she needed to protect the people around her again. Joyce was acting strange before she left and said she was

going on this trip for their family. Will and El desperately wanted to make sure Joyce was okay, since she was all they had left of a parent. El focused on Joyce and ignored the world around her.

"She's on a plane. She's with Dr. Owens and Murray."

"What are they saying?" asked Will.

El replied, "Murray is talking about Russians."

Will rolled his eyes. "Of course."

"Dr. Owens is talking about finding him one way or another."

"Who is him?"

"Will!" El scolded.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"Dr. Owens is talking about a plan. A Russian base. A prison. They have to sneak in to try to find him. Owens has uniforms for them to wear. And simple Russian phrases to help them."

Will remained silent as to not interrupt El's concentration.

"Murray is freaking out. He wants money from U.S. government after the rescue. He says he is stepping on enemy ground. Mom is rolling her eyes."

El and Will both laugh.

"Mom is talking. She says she hopes that he's here. She doesn't want to search the Upside Down."

"The Upside Down? What is going on?" Will questioned aloud.

El continues, "Owens says to have faith that he's here. Mom says she feels terrible, but she wants him to be in this prison as opposed to the Upside Down."

"Who is he?"

"Owens says they will do whatever they need to make sure he is found. Mom says she can't believe Hopper is alive!"

El tore off the bandanna and looked at Will with wide eyes. They both exclaimed, "Hopper's alive?!"

"What?" Jonathan asked in the El's doorway.

"El has her powers back. Mom left suddenly, so we decided to look for Mom in the void. El found her and her, Murray, and Owens are on their way to Russia to hopefully find Hopper," relayed Will.

"Unless, he's in the Upside Down," said El wiping the blood from her nose.

"How does Mom know Hopper's alive? She told us there was no way he could have survived the explosion of the key," said Jonathan sitting on El's bed.

El shrugged and Will said, "Murray probably has a theory."

"But Mom wouldn't just go with Murray's theory. He's certifiable," Jonathan replied.

"Maybe Owens knows something and knew Mom would want to come along," said Will.

"Yeah. He went into the Upside Down for Will. Mom would do anything for him. She loves Hopper," replied El.

Jonathan nodded. He wants to believe that Hopper is alive. His mother and El have been lost without him. Even though it's been seven months, not a day goes by where he doesn't hear his mom crying in her room or El reading that letter. "Guys, I hate to bring the mood down, but I really don't want you to get your hopes up."

"What do you mean?" asked El joining Jonathan on her bed.

Jonathan wrapped an arm around El and said, "You went into the void and heard Mom, Murray, and Owens talk about Hopper being alive. But what if they are wrong? What if Murray's and Owens' theories are wrong and Hopper really did die in the explosion? I don't

want you guys to assume Mom and them are going to find him and bring him home."

"I know, but Jonathan, we need to have hope. Mom had hope when everyone else, including you, thought I was dead. Mike had hope that El was out there somewhere after she fought with the demogorgon. We need to hope that Hopper is alive," said Will with a childlike wonder and hope in his eyes.

Jonathan smiled. Will was right. His mom never gave up hope that Will was out there. If she did, Will would have died in the Upside Down. He wouldn't have gotten his brother back if it wasn't for Joyce having so much hope.

"I know a way we could find out the truth," whispered El.

"How?" questioned Jonathan.

"I find him in the void."

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4: Catching Up

"NO!"

"Jonathan-"

"No, El! No. You just got your powers back. No way. We aren't risking it," explained Jonathan.

"We need to know if Hopper's alive, Jonathan. For El. For Mom. For us. She knows her limits better than any of us," replied Will.

"Nope. No way," Jonathan said, shaking his head.

"I can do it," said El.

"El-"

"I **need** to do it. I already found Mom in the void. I can find Hopper. I need to find Hopper and then we need to tell Mom where he is. I need my dad, Jonathan. I miss him. Mom needs him. Mom misses him. If there is a chance he's alive, I need to find him," firmly replied El.

Will said, "I miss him too, Jon. He went to every doctor's appointment with me and Mom. He was always around when Mom needed him to fix something around the house. He has been the only father figure we have had in a long time. If there is a chance he's alive somewhere and El can find him, we need to take that chance. Please."

Jonathan paced El's room, running his fingers through his hair. "Why can't we let Mom look for Hopper first without using your powers? What if worst comes to worst and she'll need you to save her and you used up all your powers? I don't want to risk it."

"I won't stay in the void long. I promise. Just long enough to find where Hopper is and I'll get out."

Jonathan groaned. "If I say yes, what are the chances you won't lose your powers again? What if by going into the void twice, you exhausted all your powers again?"

"When I think of Hopper, I smile before I cry."

Will smiled knowingly.

Jonathan's eyebrows furrowed. "What the hell is she talking about?" he asked Will.

"When we first moved here, El and I talked. She wondered why she hadn't recharged. I told her it was her grief over Hopper. I said when she finds herself smiling before crying over Hopper, that's when she would recharge. I was right. Recently, she found herself smiling before crying. Her powers came back. And now, there's a good chance Hopper is alive. Let her go in the void, Jonathan. Or you know she'll do it behind your back. Wouldn't you rather us stick together during this? We work better as a team," said Will trying to convince his brother.

"Ugh! Alright! Only if you promise you get out of there the moment you locate Hopper. Understood?"

Will smiled and El nodded. "I promise," she said.

"Well, what are you waiting for. Will, fire up the radio. El, tie your bandanna. Let's find Hopper," Jonathan replied with a grin.

El sat in front of her bed and tied her bandanna and Will found the static station. Jonathan squeezed El's shoulder. "Good luck, El. Get out as soon as you find him. I don't want anything to happen to you. If you get scared, I'm right here. I got you," he whispered.

El grinned. "You are a good brother."

"You make it easy," Jonathan replied.

"Hey!" Will exclaimed.

"You go missing and get possessed, she just has super powers. She's easier, kid," Jonathan joked.

Will and El laughed.

"Ready?" Will asked El.

"Ready," she replied.

As El went silent trying to find Hopper, Will and Jonathan shared a worried look above El's head. "She can do it," mouthed Will.

Jonathan crossed his fingers and held them up.

A few minutes went by and El has said nothing. "El, are you okay?" asked Jonathan.

"It's hard to find him," she replied.

"Do you want to quit?" he asked.

"No."

Focus, El. Focus. Focus on Hopper. Focus on Hopper. Focus on finding your dad. The first person in a long time who loved you. He found you. Now, find him. El thought to herself.

"I found him!"

"Where is he?" asked Will.

"He looks tired. And sickly. His beard is past his shoulders. His hair is long. He lost weight."

"Where is he, El?" questioned Jonathan.

"His surroundings aren't showing up yet. All I see is him. He's lying down. He's humming."

"What's he wearing?" asked Will.

El replied, "A dirty uniform. A Russian uniform."

"He's in Russia. Get out, El," said Jonathan.

Will said, "He was wearing a Russian uniform when he disappeared."

He could be anywhere in that uniform. It doesn't mean he's in Russian, Jonathan."

Jonathan groaned in frustration.

"His surroundings are showing up."

"Come on, El! You can do it!" encouraged Will.

"He's lying in a bed. He's lying in his bed from the cabin."

"He can't be back in Hawkins. There is no way he would disappear from all of us," Will said.

"Unless..." Jonathan muttered.

"Unless what?" Will replied.

"He's in the cabin! The cabin is covered in vines. He's.. He's.."

The siblings all exclaimed, "He's in the Upside Down!"

"El, get out!" Jonathan yelled.

El ripped off her bandanna and Will hugged her. "You did it, El! I'm so proud of you!"

El smiled. "He didn't die," she whispered.

"But..."

"But what, Jonathan?" Will asked.

"You were down there, what, a few days? Mom and Hopper said it's toxic down there. You were in the hospital for a week. You were coughing up slugs for months. You got possessed by the Mind Flayer. Hopper has been down there for seven months. He probably doesn't have much longer left down there," Jonathan said nervously.

"We need to tell Mom! We need her to find him before it's too late!" El yelled running out of her room towards the kitchen.

Jonathan and Will followed. "What are you doing?" asked Jonathan.

El picked up the paper with the phone number Joyce left them. "We need to call Mom. We need to tell her where Hopper is."

"But how is she going to get him? Mom and Hopper closed the gate in Hawkins. Where is there another gate?" Jonathan replied.

"I don't know! I don't care! I'll re-open the gate for Christ's sake! My dad is out there, Jonathan! He's not dead! If I can get him back, I will try everything!" El exclaimed as tears flooded her eyes.

Jonathan pulled El into his embrace and kissed the top of her head. "I know, alright. I know how you feel. I felt that way when Will was down there. I'll make you a deal, okay?"

El nodded against Jonathan's chest and Will looked on intriguingly. "We contact Mom, Murray, and Owens. We tell them what we know. Then, we drive to Hawkins. We team up with Nancy, Mike, and all them. Like Will said, we work better as a team. The last gate was in Hawkins. If Mom and them tell us to open the gate, then we won't waste any time. And I know closing and opening the gate takes a lot of energy, so, I want you to be with people that you need and not just me and Will. Mike and Max too. But, if Mom and

Owens say no to opening the gate, we don't do it. Understood?"

El replied, "Understood."

Jonathan gave her one final kiss on top of her head. "Alright. Go pack a bag. We leave for Hawkins tonight. I'll call Mom."

El and Will ran off to pack a bag and Jonathan dialed the number Joyce left for them.

"Philadelphia Public Library, how may I help you?" a monotone man answered.

"I need to get in contact with Doctor Sam Owens. It's urgent," Jonathan replied.

"Code name?"

Code name? Jonathan searched the note Joyce left. Under the number

she gave, her scribble read, *If asked, say you are Antique Chariot. I know it sounds weird, but trust me. It will work.*

"Antique Chariot," Jonathan said somewhat convincingly.

"I'll let him know," the operator replied.

"NO!" Jonathan exclaimed. "I need to get in contact with him immediately! It is life or death here, buddy!"

"Please hold."

"Thank you."

Will reappeared from his room with his book bag packed. "Did you reach Mom yet?"

"No. I'm on hold."

Will frowned. "You want me to pack you a bag while you wait?"

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah. Thanks, Buddy."

Jonathan nervously tapped his fingertips against the wall as he waited. "Sir."

"Yes. I'm here," Jonathan said.

"Dr. Owens is on a plane at the moment. But when he reaches his landing base, I will have him contact you. What number should he call you at?"

Jonathan rattled off the Wheeler's number and hung up.

"El! Will! Let's go!" he yelled.

"Did you reach Mom?" El asked.

"No. They are still on a plane. I gave them Nancy and Mike's number to call us at. The Wheeler's house will be our home base. Let's go!" Jonathan exclaimed as he grabbed his keys to the car and headed towards the front door with El and Will in tow.

"Shit!" Jonathan yelled as they were halfway to Hawkins.

"What?!" Will shouted from the back seat.

"It's Valentine's Day. I have nothing to give Nancy."

"Jesus, Jonathan! She won't care when you tell her we are trying to save Hopper. Jesus."

"But-"

"Shut up, Jonathan," El sassed.

"El, I-"

"We are trying to save Hopper. Nancy and Mike won't care that it's Valentine's Day once we tell them what's going on. Just chill," El replied.

Will laughed in the back.

"What are you laughing at?" Jonathan asked.

"It's Valentine's Day. Mom hates Valentine's Day. Yet, she might get reunited with Hopper on this exact day," Will said chuckling.

Jonathan and El shared a look before they began laughing too.

"Mom will probably start loving this day," El said.

"I think we all will, El. We all will," replied Jonathan with a hopeful grin.

"Oh My God! Jonathan! Will! El! What are you doing here? Come in!" welcomed Karen Wheeler.

The three stepped inside as Karen yelled, "Nancy! Mike! Get down here! I have a surprise for you!"

"Coming Mom!" the two oldest Wheeler siblings replied.

"Where's your mom? Is she in the car?" Karen asked as she took their

coats.

El and Will looked at Jonathan to answer. "Uh. No. Since it's a Friday, we decided to take a little weekend trip and surprise Nancy, Mike, and the other kids. Mom's busy at work."

"Aww. That's too bad. I would have loved to see her. It's not the same around the PTA meetings with your mom not around to joke with. She was always a hoot, even in high school," Karen replied.

"Yeah. She misses you too," said Jonathan.

"Oh My God! Jonathan!" "El! Will! Is it really you?" Nancy and Mike exclaimed as they approached the living room at the same time.

Nancy wrapped her arms around Jonathan's neck. "I missed you so much! What are you doing here? We weren't supposed to meet up until spring break."

"Surprise!" he exclaimed, but then whispered, "We need to talk. It's urgent."

"About us?" she mumbled.

Jonathan shook his head. "Hopper," he whispered.

Mike kissed El and then hugged Will. "Dustin, Max, and Lucas are going to shit when they hear you guys are back!" Mike said delightedly.

"Michael!" Karen scolded from the doorway observing the reunions.

"Sorry," Mike mumbled.

"We need to talk. You, me, Will, the Party. Everybody. It's important," El muttered into Mike's ear.

He nodded. "Let's go to the basement."

Mike grabbed El's hand and threaded their fingers as they walked down to the basement with Will, Jonathan, and Nancy close behind.

The younger teens sat on the couch and Jonathan and Nancy knelt on the floor. "What is going on?" Nancy questioned. "You said it's about Hopper."

"Mike, radio the rest of the Party. Tell Dustin to call Steve and bring him along," said Will.

Mike nodded. "Lucas. Do you copy? Over." Mike radioed.

"I copy. Over," Lucas replied.

"Call Dustin and Max. Meet at my house ASAP. It's urgent. And tell Dustin to bring Steve along. Over."

"Alright. Max is with me. So, let me call Dustin and I'll be at your house in ten. Over."

Lucas, Max, Dustin, and Steve arrived at the Wheelers' and joined the gang in the basement.

"Alright! What is going on? The Byers are back in town. Oh shit. Is that Mind Flayer thing back?" Steve questioned as he took a seat on the floor.

"Hopper is alive," El announced.

"What?" Max replied. "I thought Mrs. Byers said there was no way he could have survived the explosion."

Will responded, "We don't know the facts. All we know is our Mom went off suddenly and El tracked her in the void. She's with Murray Bauman and Dr. Owens. They are on their way to find Hopper in Russia."

Max looked at El wide eyed. "El! Your powers are back?"

El smiled a toothy grin and nodded.

"Okay. Okay. Okay. That's great, but why are you guys here? Not that I'm complaining one bit," Dustin said.

"El then tracked Hopper in the void. He's not in Russia. He's in the

Upside Down," Jonathan replied.

The group all nervously looked at one another.

The group all nervously looked at one another.

"Well, Hopper and Mrs. Byers closed the gate. How are we going to reopen it?" Nancy questioned.

"Well-" Jonathan began but was interrupted by the phone ringing.

Mike went over to answer. "Hello. Yes. He's here," Mike replied. "Jonathan, it's for you."

Jonathan jumped up and took the phone from Mike. "Hello. Dr. Owens! Is my Mom there?"

In the airport in Russia, Owens gave the phone to Joyce. "It's your eldest," he said.

"Jonathan!" Joyce said into the phone panicking.

"Mom! I've got news."

"What? Are you okay? El and Will? Are they okay too?"

Jonathan said, "Mom! We know you are in Russia looking for Hopper. But he's not there."

"What? How did you know I was...El? She has her powers back, doesn't she?"

"Yeah. She went in the void to find you. She heard you say Hopper's alive. Then, she went into the void to find Hopper. He's not in Russia, Mom. He's trapped in the Upside Down."

Joyce cursed into the phone, "Oh shit!"

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5: Oh, Mother

"Fuck! Are you serious, Jonathan?" Joyce asked into the phone.

"Yeah. El confirmed it," he replied, "But he might not have much longer, Mom. Will was down there for days and he's still dealing with the repercussions. Hopper's been down there for months. El says he doesn't look good."

Joyce pinched her nose in nervousness. "Can you put El on the phone?"

"Mom! Hop's alive!" Joyce heard El's enthusiasm through the phone.

"I know, Sweetheart, I know. Jonathan told me you saw him in the void. Is he really in the Upside Down?"

"Yes. He's at our cabin. Mom, he doesn't look good."

"Really?" Joyce whispered, afraid for Hopper.

"Yeah. We have to save him."

"The gates are closed. I don't know what we can do."

"I'll open it," El said with intense fervor.

"Honey, no."

"Mom--"

"No! Closing almost killed you once. I will not risk losing you. End of story," Joyce sternly said.

"Mom! If there is the slightest chance we can get Hopper back and I will risk it all to open the gate. I recharged. My powers are back. Mike, Jonathan, and Will would be by my side. Please," El begged.

Joyce flashed back to her conversation with Hopper a few weeks

after the Snow Ball...

"How are you?" Hopper asked as he sat with Joyce at her kitchen table.

Hopper has visited Joyce everyday since everything with Bob and Will went down. He would bring El over for dinner and for El to have study sessions with Joyce. Although Owens told him to wait a year before El could be out with everyone, he wanted to allow her to start school with the rest of the group of kids.

"Nightmares still," Joyce muttered as she passed him a pack of Camels.

"Will too?"

Joyce nodded. "Some nights, but I have them every night."

"I know, Joyce," Hopper responded understandingly.

Joyce looked at Hopper with gratefulness evident in her eyes. Every night she wakes up in terror, soaked in sweat, and tears running down her face. She runs to the kitchen and dials Hopper's number, which is embedded in her brain.

"Thank you, Hop," Joyce whispered while placing her hand atop his.

Hopper shrugged. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing, Hopper! You answer every call at one in the morning and you still get up and go to work and take care of your daughter! I don't know how to thank you for everything."

Hopper shook his head. "The dinners and helping El are more than enough. And you think you are waking me up? I'm already up, Joyce. I still see it all. I am still reliving the Upside Down. Now, I constantly imagine instead of Bob, it being you or El!"

"Hop..."

Joyce hates bringing up Bob. Her and Hopper engaged in a huge argument one night after dinner when he told her how Owens was going to cover up Bob's murder. Joyce full heartedly believed that Bob's parents and family deserved to know the truth. They deserved to know that he died a

superhero, not in some missing person incident. As they were screaming in each other's faces, Joyce revealed that sometimes she wishes it was Hopper who was mauled to death. Immediately after she said it, her hands covered her mouth and Hopper's jaw clenched. Hopper turned on his heel and told El it was time to go, despite Joyce begging him to stay and offering countless apologies. But, that night, Joyce had a nightmare and Hopper still answered the phone and their friendship was back on track.

"I have nightmares every night, Joyce. Every night! It's either you being killed or El being taken by those monsters. That scares the shit out of me. You two mean the world to me," Hopper admitted.

"You really love her, Hop. Don't you?"

Hopper nodded. "She's my world. This kid with super powers has given me this new reason to live. You know? God! I sound like such a wimp."

Joyce laughed. "You aren't a wimp. You are a parent."

"I can't lose another kid, Joyce. I can't go through that pain again. That's why I was such a dick with keeping her hidden. I know it was excessive, but this ego loving, power wielding kid is everything to me. What those monsters did to her is awful. She still has nightmares over her time in the lab. I just want to protect her forever. And watching her close that gate, I thought it was going to kill her. I was so close to telling her to stop, but I knew we needed this monster out of Will and out of our lives. I will never let her go through that again. Never," Hopper said seriously.

"No. El. I can't let you open the gate," Joyce said.

"Mom!"

"Closing it once before almost drained you completely. Opening it might kill you. Not happening. No way."

"Not even for Hopper, Joyce?" El asked, shocking Joyce by using her name and not 'Mom'.

"I will do everything I can to get him back, El. But, Jesus, not at the risk of losing you," Joyce replied.

"You can't tell me what to do! You aren't my mother!" El shouted.

Joyce was shocked. El and her never had this conversation. It was just an understood idea that Hopper was her father and Joyce was her mother. End of story. After the move, El came home from going to the movies with Will and Jonathan and started calling Joyce "Mom" during a conversation at dinner. No one mentioned it. It was just part of their dynamic now. She was "Mom" to all three.

"Really, El?" Joyce muttered into the phone incredulously.

"Yeah. You're not my mother. You just took me in because you felt guilty that you killed my father! Hop wouldn't be in the Upside Down if you didn't turn the key. He would be with me right now! I wouldn't have had to move away from Mike! You ruined-"

Joyce couldn't stop the tears clouding her vision. "STOP! I may not have given birth to you. I may not have raised you from childhood. But from the moment I met you, I felt like your mother. The moment I held your hands in that classroom, you were mine. And I feel horrible every single day that I might have caused whatever happened to Hopper. I cry every night, El. Every night, after you crawl into bed next to me, I hold you and I just cry. I want you to have your father with you. I, selfishly, want him with me too. But, I will not risk you. He wouldn't want me to do it."

El knew she shouldn't have said what she did. It was all in the moment and she desperately wants to save Hopper. "Mom, I-"

"Put Jonathan on the phone," Joyce monotonely replied.

"Mom, you know she didn't mean what she said," Jonathan told Joyce after El passed him the telephone.

"I know. I know. But it still stung," Joyce said as her lip quivered.

"She just wants her dad back."

"About that. I'm going to talk to Owens and Murray. I'll tell them about Hopper's location and we'll come up with a plan. I'll call you back."

"We're at the Wheelers', not home. We'll lay low here. Hurry, Mom. I don't think Hopper has a lot of time left," Jonathan whispered into

the phone.

"I will. I love you, Jonathan. Tell Will and El that I love them too. Tell El that we'll talk soon," Joyce said before hanging up the phone.

She walked over to where Owens and Murray were sitting in the airport. "Joyce! You were on the phone forever. What could your gaggle of children want? Can't they last more than a few hours without you? Jesus," Murray complained.

"El has her powers back, you dip shit. She found Hopper in the void. He's not here in Russia. He's trapped in the Upside Down," Joyce replied with a shortness in her voice as a result from her conversation with El.

"The Upside Down? Are you sure, Joyce?" Owens questioned.

"El wouldn't lie, especially about Hop. She says he doesn't look good. We need to save him immediately!"

"But, Joyce, you closed the gate. We destroyed the key that was opening it. How are we supposed to open it again?" Murray replied.

Joyce opened her mouth to respond, but Owens began to speak, "Not necessarily."

"What?" Joyce and Murray questioned simultaneously.

"When I arrived at the StarCourt Mall and went to the underground facility that the Russians were using, the gate was fully closed. It was still slightly opened," Owens admitted.

"Are you serious?" Joyce asked with hope.

"The gate didn't fully close. We'll have to get back to Hawkins and go back to StarCourt to see it," replied Sam.

"But I thought you set a fire there to cover up the fucking Russians?" Murray questioned.

"This facility was underground. There is a chance that the gate is still there," Sam responded.

"Then, let's go! Let's get on this fucking plane and go back to Hawkins! Hopper needs us," exclaimed Joyce.

"Another eight hour flight, Joyce? Really? I need a rest," complained Murray.

"Shut the fuck up! Hopper is one of your only friends. Don't deny it. You tried pushing us together. You said we should just admit it. Well, here you go, Murray! I love that brute of a man and I will do anything to fucking save him. He saved my son multiple times. He has saved me more times than I can even count. I need him. So, suck it up and get back on that plane. I have no time for your bitching!" Joyce seethed.

Murray picked up his carry on and ran towards the gate to their plane. "Let's go! You heard the woman!"

Owens let out a laugh as him and Joyce followed Murray. "What?" Joyce questioned.

"You scared that poor man and admitted your feelings about Chief-o all at the same time. You are a wonder, Joyce Byers."

Joyce grinned. "A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do to get the job done."

Before Joyce entered the gate to step on the plane, she yelled, "Wait!"

Owens turned towards her. "What's wrong?"

"What's our plan? I need to call Jonathan and update him on what to do. Do we need El to open the gate while we are on our way back to Hawkins? For your information, her opening the gate is the absolute last resort. I will not put her through that if we don't have to. It almost killed her to close it. She's my last tie to Hop. I will not risk her. "

Owens nodded in understanding. "Go call the kid. Tell him to lay low. When we get back to Hawkins, we'll survey the gate. If we need them, we'll call them once we reach StarCourt and survey the Russian's facility."

Joyce ran to the pay phone and called the Wheelers' number to fill Jonathan in.

While on the flight to Hawkins, Joyce thought about her phone conversation with El. El telling her that she isn't her mother, it stung like a bitch. Joyce felt an immediate connection to El the moment they met and El offered to help them find Will. When they sat in that classroom and Joyce promised she would be there for El, Joyce knew that El was hers forever. Joyce and El bonded over the months after El was revealed to be in Hop's care. Joyce would tutor her and also teach her how to braid her newly grown hair. She taught her about woman things, things Hopper would rather ignore than discuss. After Hopper's selfless act of sacrifice, Joyce welcomed El into their family and she was the missing piece to the family puzzle.

"On Will or Jonathan's birthdays, do they get to pick a special dinner?" El asked while helping Joyce prepare her own birthday dinner.

Joyce nodded. "Yup. Will usually picks breakfast for dinner. Jonathan, as you saw two months ago, he picks lasagna. And now, little lady, it's your turn!"

"And right before Christmas too! It's a double treat," El said.

Joyce noticed a hint of happiness in her voice. One of the very firsts since Hopper's death and moving out of Hawkins.

"Well, my dear, that's what happens when you were born only ten days before Christmas. December feels like one big birthday party. And I am shocked you didn't choose a triple Eggo Extravaganza as your birthday meal," replied Joyce.

El shrugged. "I thought about it. But I thought a mashed potato tower and chicken nuggets sounded good too."

Joyce chuckled while mashing the ready made potatoes. "Oh! El! Turn the radio up! I love this song!" Joyce exclaimed when the whispers of song beginning to play caught her attention.

El waltzed over to the radio and turned the volume knob and the song

began to play throughout the tiny kitchen,

"If you wanna be happy for the rest of your life

Never make a pretty woman your wife

So from my personal point of view

Get an ugly girl to marry you..."

Joyce hummed along and bobbed her head to the 1963 hit. "This is catchy," El said tapping her feet to the beat.

Joyce smiled, set the masher down on the counter, and grabbed El by the wrists. "Dance," Joyce encouraged as she pulled El out of the kitchen chair.

El giggled and Joyce spun her around and rocked them back and forth. Joyce spun El out and then began bumping their hips together.

"A pretty woman makes her husband look small. And very often causes his downfall. As soon as he marries her then she starts..." Joyce sung along with the radio.

El belly laughed at Joyce's awful attempt at singing.

"Excuse me, miss?" Joyce joked as she grabbed El's hands and began bopping them around.

"You're funny!" El proclaimed with a grin on her face and her eyes sparkling for the first time in months.

"I'm just trying to teach you what good music is. Not that Madonna stuff all the time," Joyce replied.

After the song ended, Joyce and El were grinning from ear to ear. El embraced Joyce. "Thanks, Mom," she mumbled.

"Your quite welcome, but what for?"

"Making me have fun."

"We both needed it, Sweetheart. Remember, we are in this grief thing

together."

El threaded her fingers through Joyce's and inquired, "Forever?"

"You can't lose me, kid. You are stuck with me for good," Joyce responded and squeezed their threaded fingers.

Joyce wiped the fallen tears from her cheeks and smiled at the memory of her and El dancing in the kitchen on the teen's birthday. *She wouldn't be my daughter if she didn't have some attitude.* Joyce thought to herself and found herself giggling at the similarities between teen Joyce and teen El.

Miles and miles away in the Wheelers' basement, El sat silently on the couch next to Max as Mike was upstairs with Nancy trying to convince their mother to let the Byers and the rest of the gang spend the night.

"Are you okay?" Max asked.

"I hurt my mom's feelings," El muttered quietly.

"When? Oh- When you said she wasn't your real mom?"

El nodded as her lips quivered.

Max wrapped her best friend in her embrace. "Oh! El, it's okay. Joyce knows you didn't mean it!"

"Are you sure? I shouldn't have said that. Joyce is my mom. She's the best mom," El cried.

"I'm positive. I say stuff worse to my mom and we're just fine. So, you and Joyce, this will blow over. She knows you love her. And I know you adore her. You guys are so much alike! So, don't fret over it, okay?" Max said in an attempt to comfort her friend.

El nodded and thought back to one of her favorite memories of Joyce: them dancing in the kitchen on her birthday. *The best mom ever.*

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6: Advice and Consent

"Here we are! The underground Russian facility. Looks like it survived," Owens announced as he guided Joyce and Murray underground where StarCourt used to be a thriving mall.

"Where's the gate?" Joyce ascertained looking around.

"Right this way."

Joyce, Murray, and Owens walked towards the control room where the gate was located. Murray noticed Joyce slightly shaking. "Hey," he whispered, gently touching her arm, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Joyce replied weakly.

Murray gave her a knowing look.

"Just horrible flashbacks. Horrible, horrible flashbacks," she muttered.

Murray wrapped his arm around her as they followed Owens. "I know, Joyce. I know. You don't blame yourself, do you? You were only doing what you had to do for that collection of children you have."

Joyce cried, "I keep seeing his face between the electro-wall. I see him looking at me with his blue eyes. He smiled and nodded. He gave me the okay. He didn't know what his fate was going to be, but in that moment he didn't care. He was willing to risk everything, you know. Everything for our kids. I look back and I can't help but think it's all my fault. I keep thinking maybe I should have waited until he found some way out of there, but Dustin kept radioing to close it. It's my fault he's in the Upside Down. It's my fault El hasn't had her father for the last seven months. It's my-"

"Stop. It is not your fault. Jim was correct in telling you to turn the keys. If you didn't, your kids would have been killed. All of them. And, I know you have been absolutely lost without brutish Jim, but I think you would have died if your kids were murdered by that

monster. I haven't known you long, Joyce, but what I do know is that you are a mother first and foremost. Jim knew that. He knew you had to protect your kids," Murray replied.

"Why would he be smiling though? If he knew he was about to die, why would he smile? That is sick, even for him."

Murray grinned. "Because he got the girl in the end. Every man's dream."

Joyce was taken aback. "What?"

"You said you finally asked him on a date before you both entered the control room. He won the girl in the end. For months he was probably trying to get you to go on a date, but you, being afraid to admit your feelings, turned him down constantly. And finally, after months, you are the one to ask him out and in a round-about way, admit your feelings. It was a hero's ending. Saving the world and winning the girl," Murray explained.

"I have to save him, Murray. I need to. For El. For me. He got the hero's ending. Well, I want the fairytale ending. I want to save my Prince Charming and I want to bring him home to me and our kids. To his daughter," Joyce expressed passionately.

"We might need his daughter's help to save him. You understand that, Joyce, right?"

"I know," she mumbled. "But I can't lose her. I can't."

"You have to put faith in her. She's strong. She has you as a mother, right?" Murray winked.

Joyce leaned into Murray and nodded against his shoulder.

The trio arrived at the sight of the gate. It was still slightly open, as Owens explained back in Russia. Joyce could see the orange light shining through. The threads looked as if they were stretching to hold the gate together, but still had enough space to show the orange light coming from the Upside Down.

"As you can see, the gate is still slightly open. Not a lot of space, but

it isn't fully closed," Owens explained standing in front of the gate.

"How did Hopper fit into it if the space is so tight?" Joyce questioned.

"I'm suspecting, just by looking at the threads and recalling the security footage, the gate was open about three more inches. That would be enough for Chief-o to slip right through the crack and avoid the explosion," Owens replied.

"Do you think someone my size could slip into it the way it is now?" asked Joyce.

Owens shook his head. "Sorry, Joyce. It's too tiny. Even for you. It needs to be opened just a little bit more and no matter what size you are, you could fit in with just the right amount of pressure. And anyway, I'm not letting you go in there."

Joyce was shocked. "Excuse me?"

"No way. I'll send a couple of my guys in there. I'm not letting you go into that toxicity, especially when you have kids out here to think about."

"You have guys? Do these guys know where Hopper would hide out? Do they know what to say to calm him down? Do they know anything about him to make him trust them? I know him better than anybody. When Hopper is in a tough spot or in trouble, he panics. He freaks out. Do your guys know what to do when that will happen? Because I know it will. I'm going in there, Owens. You can't stop me!" Joyce asserted.

"Hop! It's Joyce! I.. I heard about Sara. I want to see how you are. Please open up," Joyce begged from outside Hopper's parents' house. Hopper's dad died a few years back and his mother is volunteering at the local library today. So, Joyce knew Hopper would be alone.

"Hopper! I won't even ask you anything. I know you hate talking about feelings. I just want to see you. Please," she begged.

She waited on the front porch for a good five minutes and just as she was about to turn and walk towards her car, the front door opened. "Here. Look at me," Hopper grunted.

"Hop.."

"Joyce, I don't want a pity party, okay? You said you just wanted to see me. Well, here I am. Are we done here?"

"Can I come in?" Joyce timidly asked.

"Why?" Hopper sniped.

"We're friends, Hop. I care about you," Joyce softly replied.

"You care about me? Really, Joyce? Who was the one who ended our relationship when I enlisted in Vietnam? Sure as hell not me. Who kissed Lonnie fucking Byers while in a relationship with me and then married the fucker? Not me. Who hasn't picked up the phone once in the last decade to chat? Yet I constantly asked Mom about you. Don't say you care, Joyce. You're just trying to make yourself feel like a good person, right? Checking up on the dude you fucked in highschool after his daughter died," Hopper seethed.

Joyce held back her tears. Hopper tearing into her after years apart tore her heart into shreds. Although they haven't been an item for many years, Hopper has a piece of her heart. He always holds it in his hands and in this moment, he is crushing it.

"Just let me in, Hopper. It's cold out here. I don't want either of us catching a cold, alright?" Joyce replied, ignoring his tirade.

Hopper groaned and let Joyce push pass him.

"Well, you're inside. You've been here before. Now, leave," Hopper said.

Joyce ignored him, took her coat off, and made herself comfortable on the couch.

"Joyce.."

"Just sit down, Hopper," she commanded.

He plopped down in the Lazy-Boy across from the couch. "What?"

Joyce sighed. "Talk to me, Hop."

"There's nothing to say, Joyce. Alright?"

"Hop, I know you are hurting. Your mom.. She says you hardly eat and all you do is smoke, drink, and pop pills. Talk to me. I can't imagine the pain you are going through," Joyce tenderly said.

"I would never want you to go through this pain. Never," Hopper muttered.

"Tell me about her."

"Who?"

"Sara."

Hopper shook his head. "What is there to say, Joyce?"

"Was she like you? Or more like her mother? She definitely had your blonde hair and blue eyes. Your mom showed me pictures everytime she would come into Melvald's."

"I don't want to do this," Hopper warned.

"You made me talk about my dad when he died. You held me, right on your front steps, when I ran here after the coroner's took my father's body away. I didn't want to. I told you I couldn't. It would hurt too much. And you know what you told me?"

"What?" Hopper asked.

"Hurt means you have feelings. Pain means you have a heart. Fourteen year old you said that. Fourteen year old Hopper was wise," Joyce replied with a sad smile.

"Fourteen year old me didn't even know what pain was," Hopper retorted.

"But your advice, it worked. My heart hurt when my father died, Hop. I didn't think I could live without him. He was my rock dealing with my mom. But you.. You helped me. I remember us staying up till two in the morning, laying out in your backyard under the stars, and you let me just talk about my dad. The good and the bad. It helped. It took some time to heal, but Hop, talking did help," Joyce explained.

Hopper did not reply immediately. His eyes were fixated on the carpet below his feet and Joyce sat and waited. She waited to see if he would open up.

"She was only here for five years. She barely learned how to tie her shoes and now she's gone. It doesn't make sense," Hopper whispered with a lump in his throat. "She was my everything, Joyce. I would have moved mountains for her. I remember the day she was born. When I held her in my arms for the first time, I remember looking down at her little pink, plump body wrapped in a white blanket. Her blue eyes were looking right into mine like she could see into my soul. I knew she was special. I would do anything for her. And when she needed me most, there was absolutely nothing I could do. Why? Why couldn't I help my daughter, Joyce? I'm so lost without her," Hop began to sob into his hands.

Joyce jumped from her spot on the couch and threw herself in Hopper's lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him to her as he cried. "I'm so sorry, Hop," she whispered sweetly in his ear as she caressed the hair at the nape of his neck.

After Hopper calmed down, him and Joyce remained intertwined on the Lazy-Boy. Joyce tenderly caressed his face with her finger tips, staring at his forehead, down his cheek and back again. "How do I move on?" he mumbled.

"One breath at a time. That's all you can do."

"When did you become so good at giving advice?" Hopper asked.

"The moment I had Jonathan. I had to learn. Lonnie's a piece of shit."

Hopper laughed.

"What? It's true. I had to learn to give advice and some sort of guidance. Lonnie probably still doesn't know how to tie his shoes," Joyce joked.

"Will you stay for a while longer or do you have to get to work or the kids?" Hopper asked quietly.

Joyce gently kissed his cheek. "I have nowhere else to be."

"You can tell them how to deal with them, Joyce. The main goal is to

get him out of there," Owens said.

"No! He needs me! He's been trapped in hell for months. He's probably scared that no one is going to find him and he'll end up dying there! I need to be the one to find him and get him out of there!" Joyce shouted.

Owens groaned. He knew that there was no way to stop Joyce from entering the Upside Down to save Hopper. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'll make you a deal. I let you in there. I'll go in with you. But you have to let El open the gate a little bit. We don't have the time to create a machine that could do it for us. Jim doesn't have a lot of time. Deal?"

Joyce was hesitant. If she agrees, it's almost like she has to choose between Hopper and El. The love of her life or her daughter. She knows El would agree to open the gate a few inches in a heartbeat, but Joyce is scared. El just got her powers back. What if by using them to open the gate, even by a few inches, causes her to become drained again? What if she becomes drained and they need her powers while they are finding Hopper in the Upside Down?

"Joyce, look at me," Owens kindly demanded. "I know what you are thinking. You aren't choosing one over the other. And I'm sure that girl would think opening the gate by a small amount would not drain her. She knows her limits. Trust your daughter. Now, go call her. Tell her and the group that comes with her to come on down. I'm going to go find us some hazmat suits and oxygen tanks. We are bringing Chief-o home. Alright?"

Joyce surprised Owens by walking towards him and wrapping him in her embrace. "Thanks. Thanks for the pep talk," Joyce murmured in his ear.

Owens smiled and patted her back. "Chop, chop. Let's get this rescue mission started."

Joyce called the Wheelers' and told Jonathan to bring El and whoever she wanted down to the abandoned StarCourt Mall. She met the group outside to guide them down to the gate. Besides Jonathan and

El, the group also consisted of Will, Mike, and Max. El jumped out of Jonathan's car and ran towards Joyce. "Mom!"

Joyce opened her arms and welcomed El's embrace.

"I'm so, so, so, sorry! I didn't mean anything I said! You are my real mom! You are the best mom in the whole world. I was just so stupid. I'm sorry," El cried as Joyce caressed her back in circles to comfort the crying teen.

"It's okay, Sweetheart. I know you didn't mean it. I know. This is a stressful situation and our emotions are high. I love you, El. Never forget that. Okay?"

El hugged Joyce tighter. "I love you too, Mama."

Joyce and El smiled at one another and separated, but El kept them connected by intertwining their fingers.

"So, Mom, what's the plan?" Jonathan asked as him, Mike, and Max approached Joyce and El and the front of StarCourt.

"Let's head inside and I'll fill all of you in," Joyce said as she guided the teens in the mall and sat with them at the abandoned benches near the empty food court. El, still holding Joyce's hand, sat in the middle of Joyce and Mike on one bench and Jonathan, Max, and Will sat opposite them.

Joyce explained, "The gate is slightly opened, but not enough that a person could slip inside. We don't have time to create a big machine to open it. So, I think that means-

"You need El to open the gate," Mike finished.

Joyce nodded.

"Isn't that dangerous?" Mike questioned. "She just got her powers back. And I remember after she closed the gate, she was limp. This could really hurt her, Mrs. Byers."

"I understand that. I do. And I fought Dr. Owens about it for a while, but it's our only option to rescue Hopper. On a slight bright side, El

doesn't have to fully open the gate. She just needs to open it about three more inches," Joyce responded.

"I can do it," El said confidently.

"Are you sure?" Will asked.

"I'm sure. I need to keep the gate open three inches, just like Hopper always told me."

Everyone else was puzzled by El's statement, but Joyce understood what El was talking about and winked at her. "Three inches. Hop was right," Joyce whispered staring at El.

"I can do it, Mom," El reassured a nervous Joyce.

"I know you can. For Hopper, right?"

"And for you. So you can get your happy ending," El replied.

Joyce kissed her forehead tenderly, like a mother.

"Who is going in there to get Hopper?" Jonathan asked.

"Me and Owens," Joyce responded.

"Mom! It's dangerous down there! You can't!" Will exclaimed.

"Honey, I went down there for you and I made it out okay. I need to go down there for Hopper. He did it for you. He would do it for me. I have to save Hopper, Baby. You understand, don't you?"

"I don't want to lose you," Will admitted.

Joyce opened her arm that El wasn't glued to and motioned for Will to hug her. "Sweetie, Owens will be down there with me. I won't be long. I promise. Hopper needs us. He needs me to save him. I need to bring him back to us."

"Joyce," Murray hollered and the group turned their attention towards him. "It's time!"

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7: Saving Time

Time. Time is a conundrum. Some say time flies. Others say it moves slowly. When you are young and dumb and just want out of your parents' thumb, time moves like a snail crawls. It seems you are always obeying other people's rules when you just want to do what you feel. Everyday is a routine. School, home, and repeat. The days counting down to summer vacation feel never ending. You just want time to speed up so you can grow up. But then you do grow up. And time flies. You finally become the adult you so desperately wanted to be. You meet someone, settle down, and have a kid. Or adopt one. And time flies. One second you are holding your newborn baby girl or welcoming a traumatized kid into your cabin, and the next the baby is five years old with cancer and the kid is now a teenager kissing boys. Now, you just want time to slow down. You want it to stop. You want to go back to being a kid and thinking time will never speed up. You want to be sitting in Mrs. Fenmore's algebra class, staring at the clock, counting down the minutes until you jump on the bus with your best friend. Time is tricky. It stays the same. It's how you adapt to it that makes the difference.

Hopper doesn't know how long he's been in the Upside Down. To him, it feels like years. He never could tell when day turns to night. It's all the same down there. It's dark and cloudy with vines everywhere. He would walk around Hawkins and he felt like he was walking through a ghost town. He was all alone and time moved slowly. No one to talk to, no one to argue with, no one to fool around with. Hopper was alone, in this uncomfortable Russian garb, and no way to connect with the outside world. Everyone probably thought he died. El wouldn't search for him. Joyce wouldn't play with lights. He was stuck and time went on.

When he first arrived in the Upside Down, he ran towards Joyce's house. He was desperate to send her a sign, like Will did, that he was alive and needed rescuing. He attempted contacting her for what he assumed was days. No luck. He would also call out to El hoping and begging that she could feel him, that she could sense he was alive,

but trapped. No luck. He was stuck in another dimension and no way out.

Hopper doesn't know what caused him to jump into the gate, but he knew he couldn't just surrender to death so easily. He looked into Joyce's eyes, her eyes brimming with tears as she shook her head. She didn't want to watch him die, but he nodded. He nodded because he knew there was one way he could survive and he had to take it. For Joyce. For El. For himself. The Upside Down was a fate better than death. At least down here, he had a shot at living. If only he could find a way out or someone up there realizes that he's trapped down in this shit hole. Shit hole. He used to call Hawkins that. That town was a dump. Always has been, but Hopper would give his right arm to be back up there now, especially with El and Joyce.

Hopper thought a lot about the two ladies who own his heart while walking around the Upside Down. El, the daughter he never expected, but the daughter who gave him another chance at being a father. Hopper knew he was being over protective when he hid her from the rest of the world, but he wanted her to be safe. He never wanted those pricks to find her and torture her ever again. She was just a kid and deserved to be one. But, he also didn't want to lose her. He lost one child and he carries that pain around everyday and in every step he takes. For some reason, the universe literally handed him El and he wouldn't lose her. She filled a hole in his heart that the loss of Sara left. El was a handful. She had attitude and a fierceness about herself that reminded Hopper of himself at her age. The superpowers didn't help matters, but they struggled to find their halfway happy place. He loved having someone to come home to, someone to watch westerns with, eating sugary killers, and just someone to love him back. He loved the nights when he would be watching some stupid movie of the week and El would free herself from her room and that walkie, cuddle up next to him, and they would fall asleep on the couch. Hopper smiled at those memories and walked to his cabin down in the Upside Down. He missed her like crazy. He would sometimes sleep in her bed just to feel her, hoping that she could feel him too.

Other times, he would walk towards the Byers' house, crawl into Joyce's bed, and sleep there. He wanted to feel the other lady who

stole his heart, except this woman has had his heart since he was twelve years old. He remembers moving to Hawkins after his grandma got sick. His dad wanted to be closer to take care of her. He was riding his bike around town and saw this dark brunette girl, with creamy skin, and the size of a toothpick wearing a torn navy dress, dirty white tennis shoes, and pigtails. He always remembers the pigtails. She was standing in front of the local bar reading Little Women. Hopper found it odd since it was eleven o'clock in the morning.

"Hey!" Hopper called out as he stopped his bike in front of her.

The girl lifted her head and scanned over the boy who interrupted her silence. He had dirty blonde hair styled like most boys these days and the bluest eyes she has ever seen. He had a bike, which gave her the clue that he came from some money, but the rips in his pants and muddy gym shoes told her not Kennedy type money. She gave him a confused look in return. "Do I know you?" she asked.

"No. My name is James Hopper. My family just moved in on Westpoint. Isn't it a little weird to be standing outside a bar in the morning when you're just a kid?"

The girl replied, "I'm Joyce. Joyce Horowitz. My mom's a big drinker. This is what she calls 'church'."

"Well, Horowitz, hop on. I'll bike and you can tell me all about Hawkins. This can be your church."

Joyce's brow furrowed. "I just met you."

"So," Hopper shrugged. "I don't know anyone and you look lonely. Come on. I'll even buy you a coke somewhere. Please."

Joyce sighed and hopped behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and muttered in his ear, "Let's go, Hopper! First stop, Danford Creek."

Hopper peddled as Joyce gave him directions on where to go. Besides one almost accident, Hopper and Joyce arrived at Danford Creek. "So, what's so special about a creek?" Hopper questioned as he followed Joyce down

the hill towards the creek.

Joyce sat down besides the creek, took off her shoes, and placed her feet in the water. "Sit," she commanded.

Hopper obeyed and sat besides Joyce, forgoing wading is feet in the water like her. "Tell me. What's so nice about here that this was our first spot?"

Joyce looked solemnly into the water. "It's where my dad and I go fishing. Hardly no one comes here, so it's our own special place away from Mother," she admitted.

"You don't get along with your mom?" Hopper inquired.

Joyce shook her head. "She's always drinking. Always. The day she doesn't have a drink in her hand is the day the world ends. My dad probably only sticks around for me. They are always fighting. So, sometimes I come down here just to get away. It's peaceful," Joyce whispered.

Hopper noticed the light breeze blowing a piece of her hair from her pigtails and gently brushed it behind her ear. He didn't want to continue making her sad, so he replied, "I like to fish. When I came here last summer to visit my grandparents, my Pop took me to someplace called Tippecanoe Lake. We caught absolutely nothing. He was pissed."

Joyce laughed. Hopper knew he wanted to hear that laugh a lot more.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Twelve."

"Me too! Are you going to Hawkins Middle in the fall?"

"Yup. Mrs. Clarke's class. You too?"

Joyce smiled and nodded.

"I'll do your history homework, if you do my english literature."

"How did you know I was good at literature?" Joyce questioned incredulously.

"You were reading a book in front of a bar. You were able to drown out the noise around you. I just put two and two together."

"You are very observant."

Hopper replied, "I want to be a detective when I grow up. My dad's a cop, but I want to go to a big city like New York and solve all the murders. What about you? What do you want to do when you grow up?"

Joyce shrugged. "I don't know," she muttered.

"Come on. You have to have ideas. Nothing is set in stone," Hopper encouraged.

"I have always wanted to write my own novels. Mystery, love stories, whatever. But girls from small towns have to be realistic. So, I'll probably end up as a secretary or something. Maybe at the Hawkins Police Department. Flo would have to be eighty by the time I need a job. I'll write mysteries based on what I learn there."

Hopper felt bad for his new friend. He's able to dream big and do whatever he wants to because he has two parents that care and his family has a little bit of cash. Joyce, her parents are just trying to make it day by day. He placed his hand a top of hers. "You can do anything you put your mind too, Horowitz. I already know that and I've just met you. Don't let this town stop you," Hopper stated.

Hopper grinned at the memory of meeting the girl who would eventually steal his heart forever. They spent the rest of the day riding around Hawkins with Joyce taking him to all the places she loved: the library, Melvald's, the abandoned park behind her house, and the soda shop. The two kids shared their secrets from their favorite colors to their greatest fears.

When Hopper looks back on that day, he realizes that on that July day, he met the love of his life. Yes, he loved Diane. Diane was the only woman after Joyce left him to make him feel something. Diane reminded him a lot of Joyce. No, Diane didn't smoke, swear, or yell at him, but she was strong, tough, and could make him do anything with the snap of her fingers and a look. Maybe that's why he fell for Diane, she was a version of Joyce. She had blonde hair and was a few

inches taller, but some of her core personality traits were definitely Joyce-like. As much as he loved Diane, Joyce would always own his heart. She was his soul mate. From the twelve year old girl with the broken home, to the teenager with a rocking body but a 'don't fuck with me' attitude, and finally to the mother in desperate need for help to look for her son, she had a grip on him like no one else.

El may have filled the hole that Sara left, but Joyce filled his soul. She made him realize that he had someone who still cared, who still would listen and love him after everything life tossed at him. Loving Joyce, the easiest thing he has ever done in his life.

"Come on, Hop," Joyce groaned. "Don't make me go to the stupid Winter Formal. You know I hate dances."

Hopper slammed his locker. "Joyce, you just told me yesterday that Karen has been begging you to go. She wants to go with her best friend and do that shopping shit. You said no. Well, Karen dragged me into the girls' room before fourth period and basically threatened my life if I didn't make you go. Your so-called best friend is a terror. She acts like a dip-shit, but Jesus. I think her nails broke skin," Hopper complained rubbing his arm.

"But, Hopper... You know I literally can't stand school functions. Knowing me, I'll probably skip graduation in two years."

Hopper grabbed Joyce's hand as they walked out of school towards the busses. "Horowitz, just go downtown with Karen, buy a pretty dress, Benny and I will pick you ladies up on Saturday at seven on the dot. Karen's mom will probably take a million pictures. We go. We spike the punch. Share a dance. And then, we sneak out. I hate these things too, you know."

Joyce and Hopper climbed onto the bus and sat together waiting for the bus to pull out. Joyce rested her forehead on Hopper's shoulder. "Fine," she groaned into his arm. "We'll go, but only if you swear one dance for Karen to see and then we ditch."

Hopper kissed the top of her head. "I promise."

Saturday rolled around and Hopper borrowed his dad's car to drive him, Benny, Joyce, and Karen to the dance. Hopper wore black slacks, a white

button down, a silver tie, and his dad's black sport coat. Benny, not one for following the norm, wore black pants, a blue button down with sleeves rolled and no tie, his hunting coat, and chucks. Hopper hollered when he saw Benny's attire. "Karen's gonna shit. She's going to hate your outfit, buddy," Hopper warned.

Benny shrugged. "She'll deal with it. We ain't meeting the Pope."

Hopper and Benny were waiting in Karen's house's foyer for Karen and Joyce to descend the stairs. "Attention! Attention!" Karen exclaimed from the top of the stairs.

Hopper rolled his eyes at Karen's theatrics.

"I would like to present my masterpiece. My best friend, Joyce Horowitz!" Karen motioned for Joyce to join her at the top of the stairs. Joyce groaned and walked towards her. Hopper's jaw dropped. She looked beautiful.

"We have Joyce in a beautiful silver mini dress with a deep, red underskirt. She is pairing this ensemble with a Joyce staple, a kitten heel black ankle boots. Her hair, styled by me, is in soft curls with a black head band, of course," Karen explained as Joyce descended the stairs.

Joyce walked over to Hop. "What do you think?" she asked as she rolled her eyes.

"You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen," Hopper murmured as he pulled her in his arms.

Joyce blushed. "You look handsome, Hop."

After Karen pitched a fit about Benny's outfit and how it didn't match hers, Karen's mother took six thousand pictures. Soon after, the foursome loaded into Hopper's car and made their way to the school gymnasium. "No sneaking off, you two," Karen warned before she dragged Benny to the middle of the gym to dance.

Joyce and Hopper laughed at Benny's protests and Hopper wrapped an arm around Joyce's shoulders. "Poor Benny," Joyce said.

"Hey, he wanted to go with her. I have no sympathy for him," Hopper

replied.

Joyce nudged him teasingly. "Come on. Let's share that dance so we can get out of here."

Hopper and Joyce joined the other students on the dance floor.

Hopper and Joyce joined the other students on the dance floor. "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" began playing. As Hopper wrapped his arms around Joyce's waist, she laughed. "This song is so apropos for us."

Hopper chuckled. "Yeah. Hawkins' High chain smokers."

As the song played, Hopper and Joyce swayed to the music. Joyce rested her head against his chest. Hopper looked down at the tiny woman in his arms. She was a vision. He always thought she looked beautiful, but tonight, he sees no one else but her. His chest feels tight. He can't believe the girl he met that summer is his. All his. All these guys who think Joyce is nothing but a bitchy book worm are missing out. She's incredible. She's smart, funny, strong, beautiful, and all his. When the song ended, Hopper whispered, "Ready to sneak out?"

Joyce nodded and Hopper glanced around to make sure Karen couldn't spot them leaving. "All clear. Let's go," he muttered as he grabbed her hand and led her out of the gym and towards their spot: under the steps.

"I thought we'd hang here. We can't leave Karen and Benny stranded," Hopper said as he and Joyce sat on the steps.

Joyce nodded in agreement. "Wanna make out?"

"Umm. In a second, I need to tell you something," Hopper nervously replied.

Joyce backed up a bit. "You aren't breaking up with me, are you?"

Hopper shook his head vehemently. "No! No! I, um, Joyce, I-"

"Spit it out, Hopper!"

"I love you," he quickly mumbled.

Joyce's heart reached her throat. "What?"

"I..I love you," he whispered, avoiding eye contact.

Joyce grinned. She's never seen him so nervous, except for their first kiss. The young boy who taught her what true friendship is, the boy who kissed her in the big tree in her backyard after she cried about missing her father, he is also teaching her what true love is. She tenderly turned his chin towards her. "Hop, look at me," she said.

His blue eyes looked into hers, she caressed the sides of his face with her finger tips, and responded, "I love you too."

"Really?"

Joyce nodded. "I think I've loved you since our first bike ride. It's always been you and me against the world."

"I want it to stay like that, Joyce."

"Me too. Now, kiss me, so we can make this official," she replied with a grin.

Hopper leaned in and his lips met hers and it felt like heaven.

Hopper was sitting at those exact steps in the Upside Down's Hawkins' High. He remembered holding Joyce in his arms as that song played and realized he loved her. He loved her with the pigtails, with the heavy eye makeup phase, he loved all of her and he needed to tell her in that moment. And she loved him. He so desperately wants to kiss those lips again. If he wouldn't have fought Grigori on that platform, he would have made it out of there. Him and Joyce would have had their date at Enzo's. The night would have ended in a kiss. Hopper knows it. Joyce would have stayed in Hawkins. They would have their second chance. Hopper wants that second chance. "They'll find me. My girls will find me. I know they will," Hopper muttered before losing consciousness in his cabin.

Joyce looked up at El as she was screaming her heart out and bleeding from her nose and ears. Jonathan, Will, Mike, and Max were at her side. Jonathan gave Joyce an encouraging smile as if he was

telling her 'good luck'. Joyce was on the verge of tears watching El. She hated hearing El's screams and watching her bleed, even if it was a side effect of her powers. She could only hope that it was worth it and she would find Hopper alive.

Owens kept watch on the gate as El was opening it. He promised Joyce he wouldn't force El to open it any further than necessary. Somehow, through dealing with Will and now on the search for Jim, Owens has discovered that Joyce has become a friend. She became someone he can trust and someone he would keep his promises to.

He looked towards the gate and saw it opened just the right amount. He tapped Joyce's arm, "Let's go!"

Joyce nodded at Will to inform him to tell El to stop. As Owens stepped inside first, Joyce looked back and El smiled. "Bring him home, Mom!" El exclaimed as she sat in Mike's embrace as Max cleaned her face. Joyce nodded and entered a territory she never wanted to return to.

"Hopper! Hopper!" Joyce screamed as her and Owens searched the Upside Down.

"Joyce! Where did El say he was in her vision?" Owens asked before Joyce lost her voice from screaming Hopper's name.

"In the void," Joyce corrected. "And she said he was at his cabin."

"Well, we are in front of the middle school right now. Do you know where his cabin is from here?"

Joyce nodded.

"Lead the way!" Owens replied.

Joyce led Owens towards the long trek towards Hopper's cabin in the woods. As she walked through the Upside Down, she recalled Hopper and her searching for Will. Hopper remained calm and kept encouraging her the entire time. She had to shake off the terrible memories of searching for Will, remain calm, and find Hopper. Joyce wanted to run on their way to the cabin, but Owens was carrying an

extra oxygen tank for Hopper, so their pace had to remain slow.

After what seemed like forever, Joyce finally saw Hopper's cabin in the distance. She found her self unconsciously increasing her pace. "Go ahead, Joyce! I see it! Go find Jimbo!" Owens called out after noticing Joyce's increase in pace.

Joyce turned to smile gratefully at the doctor and ran, the best she could in a hazmat suit, towards Hopper's cabin. "Hopper! Hopper!"

Joyce dashed up the steps to his cabin and barged in. El said he was in his bed, so Joyce turned towards her left and saw him. His beard wad ratted and his hair was long. El was right. He didn't look healthy at all. It looked like he lost so much weight. He didn't look like the Hopper she was used to seeing. Her breath hitched. "Hopper!" she yelled as she knelt on the floor next to him.

She shook his body. "Hopper! It's Joyce! Hopper! Wake up! I found you! Please!" Joyce sobbed. She checked his pulse: barely there.

Owens arrived. "Sam! He's not breathing! He hardly has a pulse! Help him! You're a doctor!"

Owens joined Joyce next to Hopper's bed. "Come on Chief-o! Your kid and lady love didn't risk it all to find you dead!" Owens bellowed as he checked Hopper's pulse for himself.

"Alright! Joyce, we have to administer CPR. You ever do it before?" Owens asked as he took off his hazmat helmet.

Joyce nodded and took her helmet as well. "Yeah. We had to do it to Will when we found him here."

"Okay. I'll do the compressions and you blow into his mouth. We can save him, Joyce. Ready?"

Joyce tearfully nodded.

Following a few attempts, Hopper still wasn't responding and Joyce was now sobbing and in full on panic mode. "Come on, Hopper! Please! I need you! El needs you! You can't leave me!"

Owens began punching at Hopper's chest in full force reminiscent of Hopper pounding Will's chest. Sweat was pouring down his forehead. "Come on, Chief-o! Any time now!"

"Hopper, please! Please come back to me! Come back! Please, please wake up! Breathe, Hopper! You taught me that! One breath at a time! Please!" Joyce cried out.

"Come on, Jim! Wake the hell up!" Owens roared.

To their surprise and extreme relief, Hopper gasped and began to cough.

"Oh My God!" Joyce exclaimed.

Owens turned to search for the oxygen tank and mask as Hopper continued to gasp for air and cough.

Joyce stood up and sat next to him on his bed to help him sit up. "Hopper!"

Hopper opened his eyes and saw the woman of his dreams, the girl with the pigtails, his first kiss, his true love, his saving grace. "Joyce," he said softly.

8. Chapter 8

Chapter 8: Always

Joyce felt like she was experiencing déjà vu. She was sitting in an uncomfortable chair with hardly any cushion, sitting next to one of her kids with their hand wrapped in hers, and watching someone she loves sleep in a hospital bed with monitors around them. Last time, it was Will in the bed and Jonathan's hand in hers. This time, it was Hopper lying in the bed and El's smaller hand intertwined in hers. She studied Hopper as he slept. His hair was dirty and long, his beard was so long that El could use her new found braiding skills and braid it, and he had to have lost at least thirty pounds. The last time Joyce saw him, Hopper had a pudgy stomach due to his stress eating over El and Mike. Now, that protruding stomach is gone. Too thin, Joyce thought. When he gets out of here, I'm taking him home and feeding him eight Whoppers from Burger King.

"Will he wake up soon?" El murmured besides her.

El has asked that question at least three times an hour for the last four hours they've been sitting here watching him sleep. Joyce could tell El desperately wanted to speak to Hop. Tell him all the things she wished she could tell him the last seven months. Joyce feels the same way. She felt for El when Owens and her dragged Hopper out of the Upside Down. El screamed in delight, but soon her excitement faded when she realized he was barely conscious and needed medical help. Owens, Joyce, and El rode in the ambulance Murray called for the moment they entered the other dimension. El attached herself to Joyce's side by connecting their hands in the ambulance and hasn't separated them since. Until Hopper opens his eyes, everybody is on edge.

"He needs his rest, but he'll wake up. I promise, Sweetie. We just have to give him time," Joyce kindly responded.

El nodded in understanding and leaned her head against Joyce's shoulder.

Owens entered the room. "How's our patient?" he proclaimed as he

walked over to Hopper's bedside and checked his vitals.

"Still sleeping," Joyce muttered. "It's been four hours, Sam! When is he going to wake up?"

"Be patient, Joyce," Owens reprimanded.

Joyce groaned.

Owens clicked his tongue and looked over at Joyce. "Joyce, when I looked at Will's files when I was his doctor, I remember he was out for about an hour or two. He was only down there a few days. Chief-o has been in that toxic environment for months. He ate toxic food. The medication we have him on to clean his system is strong. He needs his rest. So, if he sleeps for twelve hours, you have to accept that. It's only for his own good."

Joyce sighed deeply. "I know. I know. We just..We want to hear his voice," she softly admitted.

Owens smiled tenderly. "You will. You both will. Just give it time. He's out of that toxic place. He's breathing on his own now. Just be patient. The big guy will wake up. I promise."

Owens squeezed Joyce's shoulder gently on his way out of the room. Joyce grinned at the kind doctor. He was more than just a doctor now, he was her friend. He helped save Hopper. She owes him everything.

"Do you want to go wait in the waiting room with Jon, Will, and them?" Joyce asked El.

El shook her head and snuggled closer to Joyce. "I want to stay here. With you and Hop."

After Hopper, Joyce, El, and Owens left for the hospital, Jonathan loaded Will, Mike, Max, and Murray in his car, picked up Nancy, and drove towards the hospital. Jonathan knew without a doubt that he and Will had to be there for Joyce and El. The four of them forged a family. They had shared trauma and a deep love that bonded them for life and now Hopper joins their family. Jonathan knew Mike wouldn't want to be far from El, neither would Max, while she waited

for Hopper to wake up, so he decided to pick up Nancy to keep him company and give him comfort. Murray curled up on a chair and slept. He complained of how exhausted he was due to traveling from the states to Russia and back again. But, he also told the kids to wake him up the moment important news about Hopper comes out.

"Do you think you guys will move back to Hawkins now since Hopper is alive?" Mike asked Will as he snacked on cherry jello.

Will shrugged. "I don't know. I want to. I miss you guys like crazy. I know El does too. But it's up to Mom."

Max sat next to Will at a table in the empty cafeteria. "Where would you guys live if you move back? Your mom sold your house?"

"I have no idea. Maybe El would move back here since Hopper's back," Will sadly replied.

Max snorted.

Mike and Will looked at her. "What?" they asked with their brows raised in confusion.

"You're shitting me right?" she responded.

Will shook his head.

She groaned. "Boys can be so stupid sometimes. Will, your mother is in love with Hopper. Jesus. A blind man could see it. And she basically adopted El. They are inseparable. There is no fucking way she is letting him or her out of her sights anytime soon."

"They are just friends," Will muttered.

Max slapped his arm. "Dude! She packed Hopper's things to take with her to your new house. She literally risked her life to find him. And she hasn't left his bedside. They are in l-o-v-e love, my friend."

"Maybe..." Will suggested.

Max grunted. "Maybe? You are such a shit head."

"They haven't even dated," Will replied.

"Uh. Yeah they have," Mike responded.

"What?" Will and Max asked simultaneously.

"They started dating when they were our age."

"How do you know more about my mother's dating life than me?" Will asked incredulously.

Mike replied, "My mom went to school with them, remember?"

"Okay. So, how did my mother and Hopper dating ever come up in a conversation with your mom?"

"Mrs. Dernham made us do this stupid family tree project. She made us write a five page paper about our parents' backgrounds and life growing up. My dad just grumbled shit. My mom, on the other hand, she was an open book. She brought out the yearbooks and photo albums. Your mom, Hopper, and my mom were like best friends. She told a bunch of stories about her and your mom growing up. Then, she flipped through the yearbooks and there in black and white was a picture of your mom and Hopper kissing and your mom flipping the bird at the camera. My mom said they were pretty serious since freshman year."

Will was shocked. "I never knew any of that. My mom hardly ever talks about her life when she was a kid. Jonathan always said it's because our grandpa died when she was fourteen. He said Mom hates talking about losing her dad."

"I don't know, dude. All I know is that your mom and Hopper have a history. And based on the pictures my mom showed me, Max is right. They have definitely been in love."

"I wonder if Jonathan knows any of this," Will wondered aloud.

Jonathan nervously bounced his leg as he waited for any news about Hopper. He hasn't seen or heard from his mom or El since they left the abandoned mall for the Hawkins General. Owens would come out

at the top of each hour to update them on any progress. Will, Mike, and Max spent their time either making paper airplanes out of old magazines or visiting the cafeteria for snacks. Nancy placed her hand on his knee. "Hey," she softly smiled.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

"He'll be okay."

"I...I'm not nervous for Hopper. I hardly know the guy," Jonathan stuttered.

Nancy gave him a knowing look. "You care, Jonathan. Maybe not like your mom or El, but you care. It's okay. He's probably going to be your step-father soon."

"Hey!" he shouted. "Don't put that out in the universe. My mom and him haven't even dated yet. I just want him well for my mom and El's sake."

Nancy grinned. "Please, Jonathan. Your mother was literally in Russia about to break into a Russian prison to find Hopper. She then went into the Upside Down for the man. I wouldn't be surprised if when the moment Hopper wakes up, Joyce drags the hospital chaplain in to marry them," she teased.

Jonathan grunted.

"They dated in highschool, you know?"

He nodded. "Yeah. My mom never talks about it. So, I assumed it ended badly. But, I saw old pictures of them. And I have to admit it, they really looked in love."

"Mike had this project in school a few months back and my mom showed him all her old high school pictures. I looked at a few with them and I remember seeing a bunch of your mom and Hopper. Mom said that they were a dynamic duo. It seems like they still are," Nancy said.

"I just don't want him to hurt her, you know? She never talked about it. I don't think she even knows that I saw the old box of pictures she

kept hidden away at the top of the hallway closet."

"My mom did say they were hot and heavy. I'd get ear plugs if I were you for their reunion," Nancy teased.

"Can we please stop talking about my mom and Hopper's dating life?" he groaned.

Nancy laughed and kissed his cheek. "I do believe you though. About wanting him healthy. I know you want him to be healthy for El. I saw you up on that platform with her when she opened the gate for your mom. You didn't take your eyes off of her. You were always ready to protect her or catch her if she fell. She really became like a sister to you, didn't she?"

"Shared trauma, right?" he winked.

Nancy rested her head on his shoulder and intertwined their fingers. She motioned her head towards a sleeping Murray. "He's certifiable, but he can tell when people belong together."

El was on the verge of falling asleep on Joyce's shoulder when the women heard Hopper start to moan. "Oh god," he groaned.

El and Joyce jumped from their seats and rushed towards his bedside, hands still intertwined.

"Hopper," Joyce softly whispered as she squeezed El's hand tightly out of nerves.

Hopper opened his blue eyes and turned towards the sound of Joyce's voice. "Joyce... Where am I?"

"You are at Hawkins General. Owens and I found you in the Upside Down and we got you out of there."

Hopper began to cough and looked besides Joyce and grinned through his coughs. "El..." he muttered.

"Dad!," she cried.

"El," he repeated as he turned his hand over, gesturing for her to place hers inside.

Joyce attempted to give them some time alone and tried to detach herself from El's grip, but El wouldn't let go. Instead, El kept a hold of Joyce's hand and placed her other hand in Hopper's. "I found you," she told him.

"You have your powers back?" Hopper quietly asked, as his mouth was still dry from his time in the Upside Down.

"Yeah," she shrugged. "It took a while, but I recharged. I found you in the void. I had to open the gate three inches."

Hopper grinned. "Three inches, huh? You read my heart to heart? Where'd you find it?"

"I was packing up your uniform shirts and felt it in your chest pocket. El wanted to read it," Joyce admitted.

"I'm so sorry," Hopper replied looking into Joyce and El's eyes.

"For what, Hop? Saving our kids?" Joyce responded.

"You thought I was dead. Both of you. I should have given you a signal Joyce that I found a way to survive somehow. I hate that I put both of you through this. I'm so sorry," Hopper pinched his nose to try to halt his tears.

El finally let go of Joyce and jumped into bed next to Hopper. She wrapped her arms gently around his neck. "I really missed you. I wish this never happened and you never left me. But it's okay. You are here now and we aren't letting you go again. Right, Mom?"

Hopper looked up at Joyce. "Mom?" he mouthed over El's head.

Joyce gently smiled and shrugged. "Right, Sweetheart," she replied to El.

"You won't leave again, Dad? You promise?" El mumbled into his neck.

Hopper wrapped his arms around the daughter he never thought he would see or hold again. "Never again, Kid. You are stuck with me. I might even ask that the door be open six inches," he said.

El laughed and kissed his cheek. She jumped off his bed and announced, "I'm going to go tell Will, Jonathan, and everyone that you are up. I'll be back."

Hopper and Joyce watched El practically bounce out the door, a weight completely lifted off the teen's shoulders.

Joyce stood awkwardly next to Hopper's bed biting her nails. "Hey, Horowitz," Hopper patted the small spot next to him, indicating he wanted her to join him.

Joyce sat on the bed and faced Hopper. She reached out and gently caressed his face, exactly like she did all those years ago when he told her he loved her. "I can't believe you are here," she tearfully muttered.

"Thanks to you and El. I knew you girls would save me."

"You missed our date. I wasn't letting you get out of it that easily," Joyce joked as tears were evident in her eyes.

"You know me, I play hard to get," Hopper teased back.

Joyce looked at the man in front of her. He was here, joking, and smiling with her just like he always did. She knew she missed him, but having him back in person made her realize how badly she missed him. Like a piece of her soul left when he disappeared.

"I'm so sorry it took us so long, Hop."

Hopper grabbed her hand and intertwined their fingers. "Don't be. There was no way you could have known."

Joyce shook her head. She cried, "But Hop! You were in that shit hole for seven months. You could have died. I thought you were dead! I thought I killed you! I had to tell your daughter that you were gone. I was the one who told everyone to give up on finding you! Me, crazy Joyce Byers, decided to quit looking into the weird and unusual!

Hop-"

"Stop! Stop, Joyce. Look at me. It's not your fault. I would do it all over again if it meant our kids and you were safe. That's all that mattered, Joyce. That's all that will ever matter," he admitted.

She raised their interlocked hands to her lips and kissed each of his knuckles.

He smiled and said, "So, Mom? What's that about?"

"You may have taken her in first, Hop, but I always thought of her as ours," Joyce revealed.

Hopper replied, "You took El in?"

She nodded. "It was the only option, Hop. There was no question."

Hopper squeezed their hands. "Thank you, Joyce. I mean it. Thank you."

"No thanks needed. You know I would do anything for you or her. I love that girl."

"She loves you too, Mom," he teased.

Joyce grinned and Hopper began to scratch at his gangly beard.

"You look like shit," Joyce joked.

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," he rolled his eyes.

"Hopper!" Will interrupted, running into the hospital room alongside El with Jonathan close behind.

Joyce tore herself away from Hopper's side to allow Will to embrace the man.

"Hey, Buddy!" Hopper responded as he let go of Joyce's hand and hugged Will.

"I'm happy that you're back," Will said.

"Me too, bud."

Jonathan walked over and patted Hopper's shoulder. "Hey, Chief," he muttered.

Hopper slightly smiled. "Hey, Jon."

"What a moving moment," Joyce sarcastically said.

Jonathan laughed and told Hopper, "I am glad you are alive. We all missed you. I mean that."

Hopper nodded. "I missed all of you as well. It was lonely down there."

2 months later

The two months since Hopper woke up in the hospital flew by. He spent a week in the hospital, moved in with Joyce, the boys, and El, and for two weeks following his hospital stay he had breathing treatments for his lungs, every hour on the hour or drill sergeants Joyce and El would have his head, which also meant no smoking. Joyce decided to join him in solidarity, but still snuck out once and awhile to have one. Also, Owens told him to stay under practically house arrest for a month or so, until he figured out how to once again cover up what happened and find a way to bring Hopper back to life that made sense. Hopper enjoyed his time laying low. He bonded with Will and Jonathan over movies or TV shows. Will tried to teach him Atari. Jonathan and Hopper would even cook dinner together and talk about colleges. He was able to catch up with El and everything that he's missed. He was shocked when he first heard El refer to Joyce as "Mom." They were sitting in his hospital room and Hopper was trying to convince El to skip school the next day and spend it with him and El said she would have to ask Mom. It reminded him to ask her about the Joyce-Mom thing.

"Mom?"

"Yeah. Mom. You know, Joyce? Who else would I be talking about?" El replied like it was common knowledge that Joyce was Mom.

"You call Joyce, 'Mom' ?" Hopper asked, still shell shocked.

El nodded. "Isn't that what I am supposed to call her? She takes care of me. She holds me when I cry and talks to me about boys. She also yells at me sometimes. Mike told me a mom is a woman who loves you, takes care of you, and raises you to be an adult. That's what Joyce is doing. So, I call her Mom."

Hopper smiled softly and looked at his daughter. Her hair now touches her shoulders. She wears jeans one size too big and oversized t-shirts under sweaters. She looks like a miniature Joyce. She looks older, wiser even. She's speaking in longer sentences. Hopper feels like Joyce has done more in seven months than he had in over a year. She has grown up so much the months he was gone. He's missed so much, especially the growth of the bond between Joyce and El. He noticed this past few days when Joyce and El would be in his hospital room together, El would always keep one hand in his and one wrapped around Joyce's. Or, when they would leave for the night, El would always loop her arm through Joyce's, as to be reassured that Joyce is still with her.

"You really love Joyce, don't you kid?"

"Yes. A lot," she whispered. "Dad?"

Another shock. Ever since he found her in the woods after leaving Eggos, it has always been "Hop." Never Dad. He chalked it up to her being so scarred from "Papa" that calling any other man a parental name, would be too difficult. But, to his absolute shock, when he woke up and saw Joyce and El at his bedside, El cried, "Dad!" He embraced her and never questioned the change of name.

"Yeah, kid?"

"When you get better and Dr. Owens lets you live a normal life again, will we leave?" El muttered, nervously playing with the blue band around her wrist.

"Leave? What do you mean?"

El gently replied, "Will we leave my family? I... I made a family with Mom, Will, and Jonathan. They are my brothers now. And I can't imagine

leaving Mom. I don't want you to think I'm a baby or a brat, but I haven't slept in my bed since you disappeared. I.. I sleep in Mom's room with her every night. I miss Hawkins. I miss Mike and Max. And Dustin and Lucas. But, if we leave here, I'll miss my family even more."

Hopper patted the space next to him on the hospital bed. El quickly joined him and he wrapped her in his arms. He kissed the top of her head and said, "Listen, first, I do not think that you are a baby or a brat for sleeping with Joyce in her room. Never. You needed her and she needed you. There is nothing wrong with that. Second, I honestly don't know what we are going to do once I get the all clear. But, I will not take you away from Joyce and the boys. We may not live with them because that's up to Joyce, but I will not take you far from them."

"Promise?"

"I promise, kid. Truth be told, I don't think I want to be far from Joyce either after all this."

El squealed. "You like her!"

"Of course, I like Joyce. She's my... my best friend," Hopper defended.

El poked him in the chest. "No! You like her like I like Mike. Like Jonathan likes Nancy. Like-"

"I get it," Hopper interrupted.

"Do you?" El prodded.

"Kid..."

El could hear in his tone not to push the matter even further. "Fine. But for what it's worth, she loves you."

Hopper's breath hitched. "Love?"

El nodded. "She would smell your uniform shirts everyday and she would wear some of your flannels, like me. She cried a lot. Sometimes, I would catch her looking at her old pictures and she would touch your picture. She said you guys had a date. At Enzo's. She said how much she wanted to go on that date. She went to Russia to look for you. Dad, she went into

the Upside Down for you. And she took me in. She did all that because she loves you."

Hopper shook his head in disbelief.

"You believed her when she said Will was still alive. You went into the Upside Down with her to look for him. You went to all his doctor appointments. You visited her everyday at Melvald's. You would call her at night when I would be on the walkie with Mike and you would complain about me. You bought a new shirt for your "not a date" date. You love her too," El explained.

"When did you get so smart?" Hopper teased.

El smiled a toothy grin. "I want you and Mom to be happy. Don't screw it up. Ask her on a date."

And that's how that got to this moment. One night after a nightmare, Hopper, who was sharing a bed and room with Joyce, was lying with his head in Joyce's lap as she combed his hair with her fingers gently in an attempt to comfort him and calm him down.

Hopper looked up at her and muttered, "Joyce, I'm sorry."

Joyce looked down. "For what? This? It's okay, Hop. You've dealt with me and my fair share of nightmares. I'm just repaying the favor."

"Well, this. But, also about missing our date."

Joyce frowned. "It's okay," she whispered.

"I was an ass to you after you didn't show. I shouldn't have put so much into a non-date. I just... I knew you were moving and I just wanted to show you that you had a reason to stay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for that, Joyce. I shouldn't have done that. And then you asked me out after all of that. I know how much it took for you to ask me, Joyce. I really wanted to go on that date with you," Hopper admitted.

Joyce brushed his hair off his forehead. "Thank you, for the apology. You were an ass. But, you are my ass. And I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that if we went on that date, I wouldn't have moved. That's why I was so scared when you asked me out before. I knew that if I said yes, I

couldn't leave. I couldn't get away from the nightmares and fears because I would have you. You, my loud, obnoxious, annoying ass, outweigh all the nightmares and fears."

"Was that a weight joke?" Hopper teased.

She lightly smacked his head. "We are having a moment here, Hop."

Hopper grinned. "So, what do you say, Horowitz? When Owens gives me the all clear, we take a ride to Hawkins and have our date at Enzo's."

Joyce leaned down and lightly kissed his lips, their first kiss since their highschool days. It took Hopper a few seconds to respond to her soft lips, but once he did, he felt like he died and went to heaven. Their lips meshed together and moved tantalizingly slow. Hopper caught Joyce's bottom lip between his and immediately their tongues met. Joyce found herself moaning. The room began to feel hot and Joyce pulled herself away. "Sorry," she mumbled as her cheeks blushed.

Hopper moved from his position and sat up next to her. He used his hand to guide Joyce's face towards his. "Look at me," he gently commanded.

She sheepishly looked into his blue eyes. "Don't apologize. At all. I enjoyed it. I missed you."

Joyce gave a slight smile. "Those seven months were awful, Hop. I missed you. Damn, I really missed you," she replied as her voice cracked.

"Joyce..."

She shook her head, attempting to stop the tears, but to no avail. "Fuck! Hop, I hate crying like this. I was out here. I had my boys. I had El. We made it. Yet, I'm here about to sob like a baby when you were trapped in that hell. I'm awful."

Hopper wrapped an arm around her and nestled her into his side. "Joyce. It's okay," he replied softly.

"No, Hop! It's not! I gave up on you! I let you leave me over twenty years ago! Then, you disappeared without a trace and I let you leave again! Why? You never, ever gave up on me. You always chased after me since we were twelve. Why?" Joyce cried.

"Why what?" Hopper asked.

"Why me? You could have anyone. Jesus, Karen would probably leave Ted if you were interested. But you want me. You want crazy Joyce. You want the person who gave up on you. Who quit looking. Why?"

Hopper kissed her forehead, her nose, and lightly kissed her lips. "Because I love you," he said, heeding El's advice.

Joyce looked at him with wide brown eyes. "What?" she replied breathily.

It was like a dam broke and Hopper poured out, "I love you, Horowitz. I think I've loved you since that summer day when I got you to hop on my bike and we rode around town. I loved you when you came running to my house after your dad died and we laid in the grass looking at the stars for hours. I loved you when you kissed me for the first time. I loved you when you would sneak out after your mom got into a stupor and we would go to Danford Creek late at night and just hold hands and talk. I loved you when we would sit behind the steps and share a smoke. I loved you when we made love for the first time at my grandfather's cabin. I loved you when you said you wanted to be a mystery writer. I loved you when you visited me after Sara and just held me for hours as I cried. I loved you when I saw you in my office after all those years when Will went missing. I loved you when you were with Lonnie and Bob, and I was so fucking jealous. I loved you when we shared a smoke while our kids were at their own SnowBall. I loved you when you would give me advice about El and Mike. I loved you when you put Murray in his place. I loved you when you turned those keys. I loved you when I saw your face breathing life into mine down in that hell hole. I loved you when El called you "Mom." I loved you the whole time, Joyce, because you are you."

"But... but after everything?" Joyce stuttered as tears fell down her cheeks.

Hopper kissed her and replied, "After everything, Joyce. After it all. It's always been you."

Joyce jumped from her spot, straddled his legs, and wrapped herself around him. She looked deeply in his blue orbs and opened her heart. "I'm so in love with you. I've always been in love with you. Even when I didn't know what love was, I know I felt it with you. You make me smile on my darkest days and you are constantly replacing bad memories with good

ones. Loving you, Hop, is like breathing air. It goes hand in hand. We are broken people. But, Jesus, I'd rather be broken with you by my side forever than put together without you. I love you, Hopper. I loved you from our first bike ride. No one ever took your place. No one can."

Hopper rubbed her back in circles. "We make quite the pair, don't we?"

Joyce nodded.

"We fall in love as young shits, we go our separate ways for years, your son goes missing and into a dimensional world, we save him, I adopt a telekinetic kid, I go missing, you adopt my daughter, you save me from said other dimension, I basically move in with you, we share a bed, we profess our love, and we still haven't gone on our first date as adults. What a story to tell the grandkids," Hopper quipped.

Joyce beamed. "It's yes, by the way."

"Yes?"

"To your date. When Owens clears you, I would love to go on a date with you."

Hopper grinned. "Enzo's, seven pm, the first available friday?"

"Yeah. You drive."

"It's a date."

Violins were being played and candles were lit as Hopper and Joyce walked, hands intertwined, into Enzo's. Joyce, dressed in a new navy blue dress (thanks to a quick shopping spree with El and Nancy) with lace sleeves running to her elbows and a pair of nude wedges, and Hopper in dark jeans ,a grey button down shirt, and dark brown sports coat, were nothing but smiles.

"Welcome to Enzo's. Do you have a reservation?" said one of the Maitre D's at the front of the restaurant.

"Uh. Yes. Hopper for two," Hopper replied squeezing Joyce's hand.

"Hopper? As in former Chief Hopper? Who supposedly died in that mall fire almost a year ago, was discovered some town two states over, didn't remember a single thing until a month ago? That Hopper?"

Hopper nodded. That was the story Owens gave to explain Hopper's shocking reappearance. "Yup. That's the one. So, out table?"

"Oh! Yes! Right this way, sir!"

After they were seated and ordered their meals, Joyce grinned at Hopper from across the table as she lifted her glass of red wine to her lips.

"You like the place?" Hopper asked.

"It's nice. A little fancy for us."

"Yeah, but you deserve fancy once in a while, Horowitz."

"Not Horowitz anymore," Joyce replied with a wink.

Hopper smirked. "Hopper."

"Damn right," Joyce responded.

The day following Joyce and Hopper's profession of love, Joyce called Murray.

"Joyce! I wasn't expecting to hear from you. Don't you and your lover boy have some conjugal time to get to?"

Joyce groaned. "Shut up. I have a favor to ask you."

"What now, Joyce? I found your man. What more could you need?" he replied.

Joyce rolled her eyes. She knows Murray cares, despite his rough exterior. He's a gummy bear inside. "Can you marry people?"

"WHAT? Are you and Jim getting hitched?" Murray yelled over the phone.

"Yes. Now, can you or not?"

"It's a little known secret, but yes, Joyce, I can marry people."

"Are you free this afternoon?"

"Where and what time?"

"Our house at four?"

"Alright. I'll be there. Will there be food and payment involved?"

Joyce groaned again. "Yes, Murray. Dinner will be served. It will probably be pizza and I'll pay you twenty bucks. Deal?"

"Deal. Joyce?"

"What now?"

"I'm really happy for you. I mean it."

Joyce found herself touched by Murray's words and brought her free hand up to her heart. "Thank you. For everything, Murray."

After Joyce finished talking to Murray, Hopper grabbed the phone and dialed Owens number.

"Chief-o! It's good to hear you. You know I can't let you go anywhere. You've got a month or so left of hibernation, but then you'll be free."

"I know. I know. This call isn't about that. I was wondering if you are in town."

"I'm in Chicago for some business. What do you need?"

Hopper replied, "There's a wedding."

"There's a bird. What the hell are you talking about?" Owens said.

"Joyce and I are getting married this afternoon. Around four or so. You want to come or not?"

"T'd be honored. I'll be there. Black tie?"

Hopper snorted. "Please. I don't think I'm even wearing dress shoes. Wear what you want. It's just us, the kids, you, and Murray."

Owens asked, "Not the other five hundred kids you look after?"

"No. We'll have a big party in the summer if the kids want. But, Joyce and I just want something small and simple."

"You sound happy, Chief-o?"

"I am, Doc. I am."

"Come on, Mom! Murray and Dr. Owens are here already! Just come out already!" El yelled from the large bed as Joyce locked herself in her bathroom.

"This dress doesn't look right! I should have just worn jeans like I wanted to!"

"It's your wedding! You have to wear a dress like the soap operas!"

"You are grounded from watching those starting tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow is Sunday! They aren't on! Now, come on! Let me see!"

The door unlocked and Joyce walked out wearing an evergreen tunic dress and nude wedges. "This doesn't look like a normal wedding outfit, El. It looks like I'm going to a picnic," Joyce complained looking in the mirror.

"You look great, Mom. You and Dad aren't a normal couple. We aren't normal kids."

"I just look like a bush in this dress," Joyce replied, pulling out the sides of the dress for effect.

El pursed her lips as she thought of a remedy to the dress situation. She searched around the room and spotted Joyce's only brown belt hanging from a hook behind her bedroom door. "Here!" she exclaimed jumping and grabbing it.

"My belt?"

"Lift your arms," El commanded.

Joyce lifted her arms and El wrapped the belt around Joyce's waste and buckled it. "There! Max said belts give you a waist. You are tiny! Does it look better?"

Joyce walked over to her mirror. She has to admit that the belt definitely helped. "Much better. Thank you, Sweetie. How's my hair? You know Jonathan will be taking pictures and videoing the whole thing."

"Pretty," El replied softly touching Joyce's soft curls.

"You look gorgeous, Sweetheart," Joyce complimented El.

"Thanks."

El was wearing a pink sundress with white polka dots all over, paired it with a jean jacket, and brown ankle boots. When she saw Joyce's hair, she immediately asked Joyce to curl her hair like hers.

"Are you ready?" El asked.

"Yup. I think so. Are you okay with this?"

El pulled Joyce into a tight embrace. "Yes. When you and Dad are happy, I'm happy," she whispered.

"Do I really have to wear this stupid tie?" Hopper complained as he dressed in Jonathan's room.

"You know El will kill you if you don't. Be lucky she isn't making you and Mom wear a white gown and tux," Jonathan replied as he tied his own tie.

Hopper groaned. El complained when he and Joyce told her that they were keeping the wedding simple. No fancy clothes. Just comfy clothes. El pitched a fit. She wouldn't stop complaining until they reached a halfway happy position of nice but comfy clothes. So, Jonathan and Will ran out to buy Hopper some nice, dark jeans, dress shirt, sports coat, shoes, and tie. When Hopper came home from the hospital, Joyce bought him pajamas, t-shirts, and sweatpants. She didn't think he would need anything nice in his house arrest.

"Thanks again, boys, for getting me these clothes."

"No problem," Will replied as he found trouble tying his own tie.

"Need help, kid?" Hopper asked.

"Yeah. You mind?"

"Nah. Come here. I'll teach you a trick."

Will walked over and stood next to Hopper as they stood in the mirror. As Hopper was demonstrating on himself, Jonathan stood back and watched. He couldn't help but think, "Lonnie would have never done this." He wouldn't have. He wouldn't have taught Will to tie a tie, cook dinner with Jonathan every night, or make his Mom so happy. As shocked as Jonathan was this morning, when following breakfast, Mom and Hopper told them of their impending nuptials, he's calm now. Happy. Happy that his mom finally found the love she so desperately deserved. Happy that Will finally has a father to teach him these things. Happy that even he has a father who will keep the family safe after he leaves for college.

"Wow! Thanks, Hopper!" Will exclaimed as he admired the tie in the mirror.

Hopper patted Will's shoulder and went to put his sports coat on. "How do I look?" Hopper asked.

"Clean," Jonathan responded.

Hopper chuckled. "Thanks."

Jonathan replied, "Thank you."

Hopper's brows furrowed in confusion. "For what?"

"Loving Mom. Us. Giving us a sister. Making Mom so happy. Thank you," Jonathan muttered.

Hopper clapped Jonathan's back. "It's an honor, kid. Thanks. The both of you, for letting me in your family unit."

Will replied, "You always were. It just took you and Mom forever to figure

out."

"I can't believe we did that. So spur of the moment," Joyce said as she dug into her salad.

"What's life without spurs of the moment," Hopper retorted.

Joyce snorted. "I don't know. I'd like to know."

"I enjoyed it. It was definitely us."

"El said she caught you watching our wedding video the other day," Joyce teased.

Hopper groaned and took a sip of his wine.

"I think it's cute, Hop. Don't be embarrassed."

"The little shit was supposed to keep her mouth closed. I told her I'd give her an extra hour on the phone with Mike if she kept quiet," Hopper complained.

"She just likes me better and knows not to lie," Joyce replied.

"Eat your salad," Hopper grumbled as Joyce giggled.

After dinner, Joyce was bewildered when Hopper drove them to the abandoned Horowitz house instead of the hotel. "Hop, what are we doing here?" she asked from the passenger seat.

Hopper got out of the car without a word and went to her side and opened the door. "Come on," he said as he intertwined their hands and dragged her towards the cracked, broken front steps. They both sat down, thighs touching.

"Hopper, what are we doing here?" Joyce implored again.

"We shared our first kiss right on these steps," Hopper recalled.

"We were what thirteen or fourteen?"

Hopper nodded. "Yeah. You called me. Crying. Your dad just found

out he was sick and your mom was in a really bad stupor."

Joyce muttered. "She hit me that night. Her engagement ring, as small as that diamond was, cracked my lip."

Hopper pulled her into his side. "I hopped on my bike and rode over here as fast as I could."

"I was so relieved to see you."

"We sat on these steps and you told me that your dad was sick. Dying. Then, I saw your lip. It had a huge crack in it."

"You leaned in and kissed me," Joyce whispered. "You asked if your kiss made my boo-boo better."

Hopper laughed. "Not my best line."

"I punched your arm for it."

"After getting over your punch, which was quite hard, I told you I just wanted to help."

Joyce smiled. "I asked you help me with what."

"To make a bad memory turn into a good memory," they both repeated at the same time.

"I wanted you finding out about your dad and your mom's slap to be replaced with something that would make you smile."

Joyce pecked his lips. "It did. I remember smiling until I fell asleep that night."

"That's why I wanted to do this here, Joyce. This house has so many bad memories for you. Everything with your parents was just the start of you hating this town."

"Do what here, Hop?" Joyce inquired.

Hopper reached into his lapel pocket and pulled out two gold wedding bands.

"Hop..."

"Don't worry. I didn't buy these. Um. Owens gave them to me. He said they were his and his late wife's."

Joyce covered her heart as tears clouded her vision.

"I was talking to him about trying to find some wedding bands for us and he said we could have these. He said they would be a sign to never give up on one another," Hopper explained.

"I love them. I'll call him one day this week. Or should I invite him over for dinner? I could make a casserole or-"

"Joyce!"

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"So, would you like to put them on?" Hopper asked.

Joyce grabbed the man's ring out of Hopper's hand. "Hold out your left hand, Hop."

She took his hand in hers and slid the ring on his finger. "You can't escape me now. I will always find you."

He grinned and took Joyce's hand. He slid the ring on her finger and said, "You're mine now, Horowitz. You're stuck with me."

Joyce replied, "Always."